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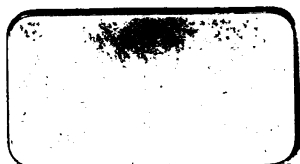
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THROUGH THE SHADOWS.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF "SIDNEY GREY."

&c. &c.

" Out of darkness, into light, through the shadows."

Vol. I.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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THROUGH THE SHADOWS.

CHAPTER I.

"We were two sisters of one race ;
She was the fairest in the face."

TENNYSON.

"No ; stay a moment, don't put it by ;
I'll think about it."

Caroline Brandon took a coral hair-ornament from her sister's hand as she spoke, held it between the looking-glass and a tall, thin candle which was on the dressing-table, and stood with a pondering look on her very pretty fair face. The ornament, rather costly and new-fashioned, looked out

of place beside the small looking-glass and the one poor candle; and Caroline, in her fresh white dress, and elaborately-curled hair, looked somewhat out of place too, contrasted with the untidy upper room, littered with children's toys and school-books, and the sister in sober grey stuff, who had been helping her to dress.

She had some right to take pride in the contrast, perhaps; she had been engaged for two hours in the "pursuit of dress under difficulties," and in spite of the one candle, the constant interruptions of the children, and the unaccustomed hands of her attendant, the result gained was something that young ladies who dress with the aid of wax-candles, quiet rooms, and ladies'-maids, could hardly have sneered at.

The question about the head-dress seemed the crowning perplexity of the evening's anxious labour. Caroline gained no enlightenment by dangling it over her white fingers,

and she turned her bright blue eyes to seek counsel in her sister's dark ones.

"It would be a very pretty contrast," Ruth said.

"Oh! I know that," Caroline answered, with a deep sigh, "only I wonder whether Miss Ash and Mrs. Warren would think it worldly to wear red in one's hair, and whether aunt Harriet—"

"You will have your hood on when you come down stairs, and when you come home again, she would not see," Ruth interrupted rather quickly.

"Oh! to be sure, I should feel very cold without my hood. Well, then, Ruth, just put it on, the red pins fasten it on each side; now, hold up the candle to let me see. Oh!—"

"It is a very pretty contrast, as I told you," said Ruth, drawing out one of her sister's long yellow curls as she spoke, to match a string of red beads that fell as low as her white polished shoulders.

“And you don’t think it looks *very* worldly,” said Caroline, with a long, sidelong loving look in the glass, “you don’t think that Miss Ash, or Mrs. Warren, or Mr. Barrett—”

“I think that, at all events, we must not pull it off now,” said Ruth; “your hair would have to be dressed over again; the carriage may come at any moment, and it would never do to keep Major Earle and Alice waiting.”

“Ah! and now I remember Alice gave me this head-dress, I am actually obliged to wear it,” said Caroline, in a tone of relief; “I am glad you put me in mind of that, Ruth, for if Miss Ash *should* make any remark about my head-dress, I can so easily explain how I come to wear it. She will see at once that it would not be right in me to appear to slight Alice’s presents.”

“I do not suppose Alice recollects that she gave it you, or that she will observe whether

you have it on or not," said Ruth. "But, Caroline, I wish you would come down before you put your hood on, to let mamma see you."

"Aunt Harriet!" objected Caroline.

"She has not come in yet."

Caroline seemed to find it rather difficult to tear herself away from the glass; she looked again, with the complacency that was excusable, perhaps, in a young girl of eighteen, to whom it was still a great event to be dressed for an evening party.

"Ruth," she said suddenly, turning from the brilliant reflection she had been studying, "what do you think the Ashes say of me?"

"Which of them?"

"It does not signify which; they say—one of them—William says, that I am exactly like our cousin, Alice Earle."

"Not exactly like," said Ruth, after giving her sister's face a studying look; certainly not exactly like; but I don't think it signi-

fies ; for some people—such people as William Ash—will think you handsomer than Alice Earle ; for you are taller, and rather stouter, and your hair is a little yellower, and your eyes bluer, and your cheeks redder, and there is more to see in you altogether ; I wish you would come down for mamma to see.”

“Do you know, they say, that in London, everyone called Alice the lovely Miss Earle,” said Caroline, with a farewell-look in the glass ; and she followed her sister, wondering, as she walked down the dark staircase, whether the time had come at last for people to begin calling *her* the lovely Miss Brandon.

She was so much occupied with the thought that she did not hear Ruth remark upon the dreadful litter that the children had made on the stairs, while they had been busy ; and when she entered the down-stairs’ room where her mother sat, she did not notice what Ruth saw at the first glance, that the fire had wanted renewing for some time ; that the candle on the

table burned with a long melancholy unsnuffed wick; and that each of Mrs. Brandon's pale cheeks wore the burning red spot that was always called there by nervous watching.

"Oh! I am glad," she said, letting her head fall back on the sofa-pillow, from which it had been partly raised in a listening attitude, "so glad that you are really in time. I thought I heard the carriage coming up the street, and I felt afraid that you would keep your uncle waiting. If I could have made Susan, or Tom, or Arthur hear me, I should have sent one of them to tell you to come down."

"You always think that we shall be late, and you know we never are, mamma," said Caroline.

"Well! perhaps, I am impatient," her mother answered, wearily, "but I have been so uneasy; I thought I heard Tom tumbling down the stairs; there was a dreadful noise just now, and I thought it *might be* his head."

"Dear mamma, you are *always* thinking so, and it never *is* Tom's head," said Caroline, not crossly, but in a piqued tone of voice. She was disappointed that her mother did not find something else to say.

Ruth, in the meantime, had stirred the fire, and snuffed the long candle.

"Now, mamma, look at Caroline," she said.

"Yes, my dear, very nice, indeed," said Mrs. Brandon.

She tried hard to smile as she looked, but it was a melancholy attempt at a smile; the pale lips were trembling too nervously, and the long, thin fingers were still clasped tightly together.

"It *is* such a pity that you will fidget yourself so sadly about little things, mamma," said Caroline.

"The carriage, my dear," exclaimed Mrs. Brandon, starting up. "Yes, I do hear it coming now. Ruth, run for her hood, put

your shawl up to your mouth, my dear, as you go out; tell Tom to go at once and open the door; don't keep your uncle waiting a minute, there—go, go, my dear."

"Really," said Caroline, despondingly, to Ruth, who, after a breathless race up stairs, was tying the hood on in the hall, "poor mamma does make such a fuss about every little thing, that it takes away all the pleasure of going out—I had rather give it up altogether."

"No, you would not," said Ruth; "you will be very happy at the party, and forget all about mamma when you are once there. Tom is holding the door open; you have not kept the carriage waiting for one moment; but I do wish all the children would not stand out on the door-step. What would aunt Harriet say, if she were to come home just now. I must make them come in."

It served as an excuse for Ruth to follow Caroline to the door, and stand out on the steps

too. She got a glimpse of the carriage just as the door was opened, of a white-gloved hand held out to Caroline, and of a small fair face in the setting of a black-hood, that turned with a smile towards her as she stood in the door-way; and having seen so much, she went back into the house quite satisfied with her share of the evening's pleasures. A great deal that was not to be called pleasure awaited her when the door was closed. The children had taken advantage of the pre-occupation of their elder sister to bring a troop of noisy schoolfellows home with them, and to hold a saturnalia of toys on the staircase; while Susan, the next in age to Ruth, who might have been trusted to watch them, had shut herself up in the store-closet, and occupied herself in reading a story-book by the light of a candle, abstracted from aunt Harriet's own room.

Ruth forgot her mother's habit of connecting every noise with some possible misfortune to Tom's head, and chased the children back

to their nursery, and scolded Susan for her selfishness, with rather unnecessary energy.

She was really tired, when, after having restored something like order, she entered her aunt's room cautiously, to deposit the candlestick in its proper place, on the chimney-piece.

No one but Susan would have thought of taking anything out of that room; whatever tumult might reign in other parts of the house, it had always a peculiar look and atmosphere of its own. It remained empty, swept, and garnished; noise, disorder, and dust stayed without, and, perhaps, other things belonging to brisk family-life, too. The window was open, and the fresh, keen March wind blew through the room. Ruth went to the window to lean out for a minute, and cool her flushed cheeks. There had been a little rain during the day, and a fresh, growing smell, telling of spring, came up from the square prim garden below; the street-lamps twinkled at even distances through

vistas of trees that over-hung other back gardens ; and the hum of the streets rose and fell on her ear. Overhead was a strip of blue sky, deepening into purple, which looked all the loftier for being narrow. The longer Ruth looked the less inclined she felt to draw her head within the shelter of the window again. The touch of the wind on her face, or perhaps something else, had calmed the flutter of her spirits, and brought the reaction towards half-melancholy thought, that with her, always followed excitement. What numbers of people there were walking in the streets, or passing between the lights and the windows in those happy-looking houses ; they had none of them anything to do with aunt Harriet ; they had, probably, no sick mother to be always anxious about ; no brother who would stay out late at night ; at all events they could know nothing about her own especial subjects of anxiety. Those unpaid bills of which Frederick talked so much to her in private,

when he was in a confidential mood ; or the broken cup and saucer that Tom was hiding away in a dusty corner of the book-shelf, and which must inevitably come to light some day, and bring a doleful hour on the entire family. What a relief it would be, Ruth, for a moment, thought idly, if she could change places with some other person, have just one little taste of freedom from the old cares ; try a new sort of life if but for an hour or two. Then another turn of thought came ; these same cares, why did they sometimes look so great, and sometimes so small. What was the real truth about them. Could there be light, and freedom, and higher thoughts without the house, and only that old weight within ; or was it something more inward still ; something that she must always carry about with her through every change of place, or did it depend upon herself to cast it off. Was not the weight being lifted up a little even now. The bells of the old church

began to ring as Ruth listened. The sweet glad sound now rose above, now mingled and harmonised with the ceaseless murmur of the town, making the harsher notes seem but a deep bass accompaniment to its own airy music. The pleasure it gave Ruth startled her out of her reverie. Of all things in the world Aunt Harriet most disapproved of church bells ringing, except on Sunday morning, or at times when she had always been accustomed to hear them; what would she say if she discovered Ruth intruding in her room expressly to listen to them.

Ruth was glad that she had not indulged in longer solitude when she returned to the sitting-room, for she found that she was wanted there. The children, under Susan's eye, had subsided into their usual evening places in the parlour, and nothing worse might be expected from them during the remainder of the evening, than an occasional explosion of laughter, or a suppressed quarrel, illustrated by sly

cuffs and kicks under the table; but Mrs. Brandon had found a fresh subject to worry herself about, and Ruth, seeing no alternative, settled herself on a low stool by the sofa, and with one pale hand in hers, braced herself up to the hearing of that ever-renewed flow of gentle self-accusation and complaint which long custom had enabled her to listen to quietly, but always with the same pain.

“Yes, my dear,” Mrs. Brandon began, “I was impatient, I know that, impatient with poor Caroline, just as she was going to have a little amusement; I hope she did not care enough about my uneasiness to let the thought of it spoil her evening. No, my dear, there is no use in your saying anything about my nerves. Aunt Harriet is quite right in what she says; it is my temper that is in fault, and when I think how much we have to be thankful for, and of all your dear aunt has done for us, and how ungrateful we all are,—and oh, my dear,

Susan says that Tom brought *little Harry Meyer* home with him from school."

"I sent him away the instant I saw who it was," said Ruth, soothingly, "and aunt Harriet need never know that he has been here."

Mrs. Brandon sighed.

"It is very strange," she said, "that you should all of you be always bringing up something or other about the Meyers, when you know there is nothing ever disturbs aunt Harriet so much."

"Mamma," said Ruth, with something of the pleasure of a person who approaches a forbidden subject, "I will tell you something that I have discovered. I am quite sure now that it was Maxwell Meyer who induced Dr. Cox to put Tom and Arthur on the foundation of the grammar school; and Fred thinks that it was Mr. Meyer who persuaded Mr. Gadstone to take him into his office without a premium. He says he will never believe that Mr. Gadstone would have done anything so

generous, unless Mr. Meyer had used all his influence to make him."

"My dear, you would not say such things if you had only heard how Mr. Meyer behaved to your grandpapa."

Ruth had been told this more or less emphatically ever since she was ten years old, and lately she had found herself wondering whether the little Meyers heard as often how grandpapa had behaved to Mr. Meyer. Impelled by a perverse feeling she went on:

"I believe *all* the Meyers take a great interest in us ; whenever I meet our cousin Maxwell at Earle's Court he talks about you. One day we were looking at the pictures in the hall, and I told him that Aunt Harriet had Uncle Arthur's picture here in this house, and that, in spite of all her anger against him, she had taken care of it, when grandpapa had had it removed from the hall at Earle's Court. Maxwell said he would give anything to see it, even for ten minutes

and I really think he ought ; surely he has more right to care for it—the picture of his own father, than anyone else has. Some day, when Aunt Harriet is out, I shall—”

A nervous tremor of the hand she held made Ruth stop short, and bitterly regret that she had gone so far.

“ Mamma, mamma, I did not mean to frighten you ; you know I would never do anything to trouble you,” she said, “ but I do wish I knew the whole truth about Uncle Arthur and grandpapa, and the Meyers ; and then I should not always be wishing to talk about them. I wish you would tell me the whole history, the facts as they actually happened.”

Mrs. Brandon laid her head back on the sofa with a long-drawn sigh ; old facts that would take fresh perplexing aspects, and old faces that looked alternate pity and reproach, out of the distant times, were quite ready enough to be the companions of her sick couch ; there

was no need for her to clothe them with words that they might stand out more distinctly yet, and gain fresh power to wound her.

She lay quiet a long time, and when she opened her eyes again, Ruth was prepared to start a fresh subject of conversation, and had made a strong resolution to avoid the vexed Meyer question for the future.

She had brought her mother into very comfortable chat about Caroline's pretty looks, and was skilfully leading on to one of those confidential talks respecting her early married life, in which Mrs. Brandon sometimes forgot present sorrow, when the sound of a deliberate firm step on the stairs caused a little electric thrill to pass through the room, and startled everyone into an attitude of preparation. Mrs. Brandon drew her hand away from between Ruth's two; Ruth jumped up and restored the stool to its proper place near the fire; Susan hid her story-book in a basket of plain-work; the children's talking and laughter

subsided lower and lower, and at last went out altogether, as the door opened quietly and admitted the mistress of the house, Miss Harriet Earle,—and something else with her, an indefinable something which, somehow or other, always went into and came out from every company, into which she went and came. It was felt by everyone, this mysterious accompanying atmosphere; but none knew its full weight and pressure so entirely as the widowed sister and the orphan children, whom Miss Earle had taken into her home. For them, it came in with her, but it did not so surely always go out again. The chairs and the tables, the carpet and the ceiling, the very walls of the house, had absorbed some of it, and breathed out “Miss Harriet Earle” distinctly enough to keep a very wholesome check on the spirits of the inmates even in her absence.

She came in quietly, and there was nothing formidable in her outward appearance to account for the instant change her entrance

caused. The figure that entered the room was that of a thin, middle-aged lady, faultlessly neat, with the regular-featured fair face, and dark-fringed, blue eyes, which appeared to have been the birthright of the Earles ever since the family had begun to have their pictures taken.

Mrs. Brandon and Ruth, each with very different eyes, looked anxiously at Miss Earle's face as she approached the light, to see if any additional upward-wrinkling of the brow or down-drawing of the mouth betokened that Tom's presumptuous conduct in bringing Harry Meyer to the house had come to light. The penetration of both was at fault; the close-shut mouth told only that a dignified silence and reserve was the line of conduct determined on for the evening, and they knew that if it were merely a calm before a storm they must wait to know on whom the tempest would fall, till the thunder-cloud was fully brewed.

Ruth was satisfied with the present respite, but Mrs. Brandon lay back on her sofa and listened through the silence, to her sister's step about the room, and to the sharp click of the cups and saucers as she prepared the tea, with a sick heart and quivering nerves.

When the tea was made, it was time to begin to consult the clock anxiously, and to wonder, as every five minutes stole away, whether or not, Frederick would be very late again this evening.

The moments passed, and he did not make his appearance; the tea-equipage was finally dismissed, and the children resumed their work and their books. Ruth thought she knew quite well what sort of an evening they were going to have. She sawspread out before her the slow hours until bed-time, passed with the feeling of sitting in a cold, clinging, grey mist. The chance of any event arising to change the prospect appeared much too improbable to be thought of.

For once in her life, however, she was to have an experience in the occurrence of unforeseen possibilities. Before the children had been sent to bed there came a loud knock at the door, not at all like the hesitating single rap which was all Fred ventured on when he knew he was late. Mrs. Brandon and the children looked up curiously, Miss Earle left off counting the rows in her knitting, there was a minute's talk at the door, the sound of steps was heard coming down the hall; then the door was thrown wide open, and a tall man in a rough coat stood for a moment in the doorway, shading his eyes with his hands, and looking eagerly in, as if to make sure of the identity of the inmates of the room before he entered.

When his eyes were sufficiently accustomed to the light to see the inquisitive young faces that were turned to him, and to recognise Miss Earle's stately figure preparing to rise from her chair, which had its back

to the door, he smiled and came forward.

"You do not recollect me," he said, "but I know you all perfectly. Aunt Harriet, turn round and look at me; I am Sebastion Earle."

The knitting fell from Miss Earle's fingers, the blood rushed over her face, brightening it as Ruth had thought nothing ever could brighten it, and then, wonder of wonders, she held out both her thin, black-mitted hands, which actually trembled with agitation, and the stranger, taking them with a strong, cordial clasp, stooped down and kissed her cheek: the two were glad to see each other.



Mrs. Brandon's turn came next.

"My dear," she said, as Sebastion walked on tiptoe towards the sofa, and took her hand, almost as if he were afraid of touching anything so frail, "you must not think that we had forgotten you; but you have been away so long, and we all quite thought you

were in Africa ; and you have grown so tall, so much taller than even dear Fred, and so very brown."

Miss Earle cut the slow dropping sentences short here by breaking in with an eager question or two relative to Sebastian's wants and comforts ; and when she had ascertained that he had travelled from London that morning and dined on the road, and intended to sleep at her house that night, her unwonted agitation gave way before the necessity of attending to every-day household cares. She soon left the room to assist her servant in preparing a bed for her guest, and despatched Ruth into the kitchen, with very minute directions about sundry additions that were to be made to the usual plain supper.

. It was always a treat to be sent out of the stiff parlour, with its silent company, into the dainty, bright-looking kitchen, and the society of the chatty servant-maid. Ruth made the most of her opportunity, and lingered long



after her business was concluded, burning her face and a piece of toast before the fire, and trying to settle to her own satisfaction, whether or not this sudden re-appearance of her sailor-cousin would be worth more than the brightening of one evening. Hope said one thing, recollection said another. Tall and imposing as Sebastian looked now, Ruth's memory of four years ago gave back nothing but the picture of a reserved, proud, painfully awkward youth, who had had an unlucky knack of engendering disputes among the cousins, and who was always sure to blunder out before Aunt Harriet or Major Earle any piece of news which Caroline, Frederick, or Alice had considered it judicious to keep in the back-ground. However this might be, his coming brought a new face about the house, and a new character for her to study, and Ruth concluded that it was a subject for rejoicing. She smiled to herself as she wondered what side he would take in the present perplexed state of family

politics, and gave herself leave to run up stairs in good spirits when she recollected that for the future there would be one person in the house, who, to judge by past performances, would have courage to talk about the Meyers to Aunt Harriet's very self.

The first sentence Ruth heard when she returned to the parlour proved that whatever other change had come over her cousin, he had certainly not lost his talent for asking *mal-à-propos* questions. He had not been in the house an hour, and yet he had touched already on a sore subject. He was asking where Frederick was, and observing that Mr. Gadstone must keep uncommonly late hours, if his clerks were employed till this time in the evening. Ruth saw the anxious look come back into her mother's eyes, and divining some words that were about to fall from her aunt's lips, she courageously threw herself into the breach, though with a twinge of conscience, too, for what she was saying:

“There is a lecture to-night at the school-room at the Leasows; Fred may have stayed to hear it. He told me that Maxwell Meyer was going to give a lecture to the work-people in the manufactory; something about Shakespeare’s plays, I think he said.”

In the middle of Ruth’s confused sentence, her cousin’s tall figure began to rise slowly from his chair; and before she had done, he was standing over her with his resolute Earle eyes fixed on her face.

“I beg your pardon, but who did you say was to give the lecture?” he asked; “you must have made a mistake in the name, or I misunderstood you—Maxwell Meyer, did you say?”

Ruth had framed her sentence cautiously, to avoid a direct falsehood, and how to reconstruct it judiciously, and keep out the offending name, puzzled her for a moment. There certainly was another name to call that same person by; she understood quite well what

Sebastion meant, but she had hardly courage for such a bold step.

Miss Earle interposed.

“Ruth wishes us to suppose,” she said, “that Frederick stays out late to-night, that he may attend a lecture given, it seems, by Maxwell Mey—”

She paused : Sebastion had wheeled round, and was confronting her ; the two pairs of grey eyes looked steadfastly into each other for a full minute ; it was a contest of wills, on which much future supremacy depended ; the balance trembled for a minute, and then the stronger conquered. Miss Earle dropped her eyes, and in a low mortified voice, finished her sentence.

“By your brother—Maxwell Earle.”

“My brother, Maxwell Earle !” Sebastion repeated after her, emphasising every word in a voice that was at once firm and sweet. Then he retreated to his seat, and after a minute’s silence, burst into a little laugh. It might have

been a laugh of triumph for his victory ; but he tried to give a different colour to it by his next speech.

“Little Max giving lectures to working men ! well, that is something amusing to hear on one’s first night ashore.”

“The world turned upside down,” said Miss Earle, bitterly, “the teacher, the subject, and the scholars, all equally out of place ; but if you stay here long, you will learn not to be surprised at anything done by any of those Meyers.”

“This appears to be something done by one of us Earles,” observed Sebastion, the determined look coming back again into his eyes. Then, in a lower tone, and looking not at Miss Earle, but at Ruth, he added, “have any of you seen him lately ?”

“Caroline and I see him now and then at Earle’s Court,” said Ruth, feeling excited enough to be very brave ; “and Fred sees him almost every day ; he often comes into the

office to write letters for Mr. Meyer, and help him when he is very busy, but he is not being brought up to the business—he is an artist. You won't find him altered, excepting, indeed, that he has grown taller; he looks precisely as he used to do before you went away. But," she went on quickly, as a sudden fear and the dread of another question flashed into her mind, "have you had no letters. Did not you get the letters that were written to you two years ago. Have not you heard?"

"Of my mother's death?—yes," said Sebastian, bending down his head; "I got all my letters at the same time, when I returned to Alexandria, two months ago. I set off home as soon as I could after I had heard."

"You only heard two months ago?" said Mrs. Brandon, compassionately.

"It is not to be wondered at; I was travelling where no letters could possibly follow me; it was my own fault."

"It was no fault," said gentle Mrs.

Brandon ; "and even if you had been nearer, you could not possibly have reached England in time; it was so sudden—no one expected it."

"I know—I had letters from my step-father Mr. Meyer, and from Maxwell," Sebastion said shortly, as if the subject would not bear talking about.

There was a few moments' silence and then Sebastion asked :

"Does Mr. Meyer live at the Leasows still, and is Max with him?"

"They say that Mr. Meyer is likely to marry again almost immediately," observed Miss Earle, without looking up from her knitting.

"But it is not true—you know it is not," cried Ruth, seeing, as Miss Earle did not, how Sebastion winced under the words.

"Thank you for setting me right, Ruth," Miss Earle answered. "Sebastion, when you wish for any information about Mr. Meyer, or any others among the low people with

whom your poor mother had the misfortune to be connected, I beg to refer you to your cousin Ruth. Knowing how painful it is to me to hear them talked about, she considerably takes care always to have something to say on the subject."

"We have none of us any right to speak in your house, on any subject which is disagreeable to you, Aunt Harriet," Sebastian observed, rather haughtily; "I shall hope to hear my brother called by his proper name, and recognized as a member of our family here and everywhere; for the rest, I have no wish to cultivate intimacy with Mr. Meyer; no one can regret more than I do that Maxwell has been left so entirely to his stepfather's care that even his own relations appear to forget who he is. I have returned to England principally in the hope of being able to alter his position."

"It was his own choice," said Miss Earle, gloomily.

"And he will never alter it," cried Ruth. "You might as well have stayed in Africa, if you have come for that purpose, cousin Sebastion. You will never make Max ashamed of his father and his brothers and sisters, however much you may choose to look down upon them."

"Ruth, my dear love," exclaimed Mrs. Brandon, aghast.

"I am glad to hear you express some surprise, sister," Miss Earle said, flushing and bridling; "when you have leisure, and feel yourself equal to it, you will perhaps take the trouble of reproving Ruth for her unbecoming habit of contradicting her elders, and giving her opinion where it is not asked. My words, I have long noticed, are of no avail. You may well look surprised, Sebastion, but you must prepare yourself for seeing me treated with contempt in my own house now. It is not precisely what I was once accustomed

to, as you know, but it is perhaps the reward I might have expected for the sacrifices I have been making all my life. It is perhaps natural that those whom I have taken into my house to keep them from starving, should turn against me, and despise me in my old age."

"Oh, sister, sister," said Mrs. Brandon, piteously.

The moan with which these words came out smote Ruth to the heart, and was a bitter punishment to her for her want of consideration. She would have given anything to have recalled her words, now that it was too late. She understood perfectly what she had done; her momentary want of self-command had brought a gloomy time upon the whole family that might last for days. A time when her mother would languish and suffer, and the elder boys keep out of the way; and the children grow sullen and restless under constant unjust reproofs. It seemed a long punishment for a

few hasty words, but Ruth had had experience, the penalty had been inflicted often enough, she might have learned to weigh her words well by this time ; so she told herself during the few minutes' silence that followed, when the clock on the chimney-piece clicked distinctly, as it had often done before in similar silence, and when everyone in the room wondered who would have courage to say the first words.

They came at last from Sebastian. He made several attempts to draw the conversation back to indifferent subjects, and Ruth seconded him with all her powers ; but it was in vain. Miss Earle retained an obstinate, and Mrs. Brandon a frightened silence. Wearied at length with making remarks which no one answered, Sebastian got up, and offered to take upon himself, Frederick's duty of calling at Mrs. Warren's house to escort Caroline home after her evening's entertainment.

Mrs. Brandon had lamented several times during the course of the evening, that Major Earle should be obliged to come round again by Stone Street, and Sebastian now proposed to obviate this difficulty by presenting himself at Mrs. Warren's house in Frederick's stead.

He should not be sorry, he remarked, to meet his uncle, Major Earle, that night, and be the first to inform him of his return to England.

Ruth, who rather dreaded his departure, tried to telegraph a request that he would not leave them, but he either could not or would not understand her eye-language.

As soon as the door shut after him, the storm that had been gathering all the evening fell—fell on the gentle head bowed already by so many storms. And yet, perhaps, *storm* is hardly the right word to use ; it was only one of the scenes that happened often enough in that carefully-kept little parlour. There was

no vulgar violence or indecorum about it, the rain of words fell evenly and slowly, everyone heavy and telling. On one side there were reproaches for past services, complaints of ingratitude, sarcastic insinuations, all the more bitter because they welled up from a fountain of love suppressed and poisoned long ago; on the other only weak excuses, sobs, and tears, and cries for pity, that fell on an ear too heavy with anger to hear them. Ruth, the real culprit, sat still with tight-clasped hands, to bear her punishment as best she might, the punishment of seeing her mother suffer for her fault.

In the meantime, Sebastion walked along the street in the moonlight, in a thoughtful mood. He had seen some things of which he disapproved, and yet, on the whole, he was not disappointed in his relations, looked at for the first time with the discriminating eyes of a man who had seen the world. One part of their conduct had pleased him especially.

He had been away from his native country for four years; during that time he had visited lands seldom trodden by European feet, and done one or two deeds that had already made his name known, and yet they had not troubled him with a single question respecting what he had seen or done; they had talked about their own affairs and quarrels with as entire an interest as if they were the only concerns of moment in the whole world. Nothing could have fallen in more completely with Sebastian's peculiar humour than this.

CHAPTER II.

"The chief thing is the government of the tongue as relating to discourse on the affairs of others and to the giving of characters. It were very much to be wished that this did not take up so great a part of conversation."

BISHOP BUTLER.

RUTH was not very far wrong when she said that Caroline would forget all about her mother's troubles as soon as she was out of the house.

The house-door, shutting out, as it closed after Ruth, a view of the littered hall and the refractory children, looked very like a friendly barrier between herself and care. Caroline could hardly be blamed for turning her thoughts, with something of a self-congratulatory feeling, to her own prospects for the evening.

That she was seated in a handsome carriage, well-dressed herself, and actually on her road to the pleasures of an evening-party, were facts in themselves well worth realising and tasting thoroughly; it would have been a pity not to have drawn all the good out of them that they were capable of affording; and Caroline had time given her for silent enjoyment; no entertainment pleasanter than her own thoughts was likely to be offered by the companions now seated opposite to her.

Major Earle had noticed her entrance, apparently, for, as she stepped into the carriage, he had put out his hand and drawn the skirt of his daughter's white dress closer round her, as if to prevent its being spoiled by the touch of his niece's foot. He then pulled up the carriage-window with a jerk and subsided into his own corner of the carriage. Caroline would as soon have thought of attempting to draw a bone from the mouth of a petulant and snappish dog as of addressing

her uncle when he had given such decided intimation that he intended to be silent.

Her cousin, Alice Earle, leant back in the other corner of the carriage, and, though her looks were very far from suggesting the comparison called up by her father's, there was nothing in the expression of her face that encouraged Caroline to begin a conversation.

She had turned it to the window, though she was not looking out, and the lights from the street lamps, as they passed along, came and went upon it. Some people—but not such people as Caroline—would have found enough there to have occupied their thoughts during the drive. The delicate oval face, showing paler for its black wrapping, had the same sort of look upon it that a landscape has on a still moonlight night; deeply shadowed, but calm, and giving promise of having some quite different look when it had sunlight instead of moonlight to give back to the gazer.

Caroline knew this aspect of her cousin's face well, and it repelled her in the same way that some people are constrained to turn from the window on still summer nights and talk and laugh at their ease, with their faces towards the furnished room and the lighted candles.

The drive lasted long enough to give Caroline time to exhaust her pleasant thoughts, and begin to be fidgetty and fluttered because no one noticed her; she was one of those unlucky people who are made equally nervous by notice or neglect; but, at last, the carriage stopped before a large house a little way out of the town, where the brilliantly-lighted windows and crowded carriage-drive gave tokens of a large evening party.

Major Earle jumped out of the carriage and walked into the house without waiting for the ladies; Alice followed him slowly, as if she were walking in her sleep; Caroline entered last, and as soon as she came under the full

light of the hall-lamp was seized by an attack of self-consciousness that made her wish herself safe back in her aunt's little dark parlour. How dreadful it would be, she thought, if Major Earle and Alice were to walk up stairs before she could get her hood off, and leave her behind. The frightful supposition paralyzed her fingers, and made her draw the worn-out, deceitful, ropy old hood-strings into a knot. She fumbled at them with trembling hands. Major Earle looked at her from under his bushy eyebrows, while Alice, slipping off her hood and cloak, put her hand on her father's arm, and moved forward.

They had reached the foot of the stairs, and Caroline felt inclined to scream, before Alice, waking out of her reverie, remembered Caroline for the first time since she had taken her seat in the carriage, and turned round to look for her. It was not the full light from the lamp falling on her face that made such a change there, it was as if a light from within

had flickered up, and was shining through. Every line of the face and figure was expressive now. The humble deprecatory glance with which her eye met Caroline's, told all the shame for her own and her father's neglect, that she dare not put into words. Her smile had as instantaneous an effect in easing Caroline's wounded self-love, as the touch of her dexterous slender fingers had in reducing the refractory hood-strings to order; then, by a quiet movement, the cousins changed places. Caroline found herself leaning on her uncle's arm with Alice following behind, and she entered the drawing-room in the full glory of sharing the announcement—Major Earle and the Misses Earle. If the company assembled had been such as Major Earle thought worthy of his notice, he would not have chosen that his niece should be brought prominently before it instead of his daughter; but there were no suffrages to be obtained that evening, that appeared to him worth having. Caroline was,

therefore, at liberty to attract all eyes, if she liked, and enjoy for five minutes the reputation, among the townspeople, of being that Miss Earle of Earle's Court, whose presence in any party at Kingsmills was sufficient to give it a flavour of aristocracy.

It was hardly possible for two people to be more like, and yet more unlike, than these two cousins. The likeness was the first thing that struck the eye, and was strong enough to make people, who had only seen Alice once or twice, accept Caroline in her place. As Ruth had said, the only marked points of difference between them were, that Alice was smaller, and the colouring of her hair, and eyes, and cheeks, somewhat paler than that of her cousin's.

One or two people remarked, as the three passed up the room together, that they had not been aware before that Miss Earle was so strikingly handsome. Caroline, who had quick ears for compliments, heard the whispers,

and felt them to the very bottom of her vain little heart.

Her vanity received a little wound by-and-bye, when the hostess came bustling half-way down the long room to receive her most distinguished guests. Caroline was, in truth, a much closer acquaintance of this lady's than Alice; but Alice received the first and warmest greeting, while Caroline was roughly thrust down from her temporary elevation, by receiving a cool—

“Ah! my dear Miss Brandon, and you, too, how kind of your uncle to bring you, and of your poor dear mamma to spare you to me.”

Fortunately for Caroline's self-complacency, however, the hostess had other guests to receive, and soon glided away. Major Earle was drawn aside by a gentleman with whom he was anxious to have some conversation, and when the two girls were left alone fortune smiled on Caroline again; she recovered from

her little rebuff, and found herself in a position to patronize her cousin. She was far more at her ease than Alice in a Kingsmill's party, and had no difficulty in calling round her a little circle of admirers. Though she had never been out in the evening before, she had, by a diligent attendance at bazaars, school-feasts, and religious meetings, made a considerable circle of acquaintance in the town, and it happened that the greater part of the guests assembled that evening belonged to the particular circle, within which Mrs. Brandon was anxious to restrict her daughter's acquaintance. Alice, as one person after another was presented to her by Caroline, ventured in a low tone to make a remark on the number of new faces that met her eyes. She thought, she said, though she confessed that her memory on such points was not very accurate, that she had met quite a different set of people, when she had accompanied her father to this house on a similar occasion two years ago. Caroline re-

ceived the remark with raised eyebrows, and gestures of astonishment.

"Is it possible," she exclaimed, louder than Alice would have spoken on such a subject anywhere, "is it possible that you don't know what a great change has taken place in Mrs. Warren's state of mind since then? Why, she has given up the world, she has become quite serious. This is not a worldly party; I should not have been allowed to come with you if it had been, mamma does not intend me to go to worldly parties."

"I had forgotten," said Alice, "but I am very glad to hear that this party is to be something different from the others, for I am very tired of the old sort."

"Oh! as to that," replied Caroline, candidly, "I don't suppose you would ever find out the difference, excepting, to be sure, that rather different people are here, and that, perhaps, before the end of the evening, some one will be asked to expound—that is considered *the sign*

in Kingsmills ; there are many who will not go to a party where *that* is not done. Miss Ash, for instance, the lady in red silk opposite, and Mr. Barret, that short gentleman, in a white neck-cloth, near the chimney-piece."

"I wish you would introduce me to the Miss Ashes," Alice said, "I have heard so much of them, and as this is the first unworldly party I have ever been to, and as I am heartily tired of what you call the worldly ones, I should like to be near the people amongst whom I am most likely to discover the difference ; perhaps I shall find it greater than you think."

The request somewhat embarrassed Caroline ; she had two reasons for feeling inclined to avoid the society of her mother's particular friends that evening. The first and weightiest was the consciousness of the scarlet beads in her hair, and of this she could not rid herself for an instant, for they clicked every time she moved her head, and Caro-

line's head never remained in the same position for two minutes together ; the second was the recollection that she had frequently talked to Miss Ash about her intercourse with Alice Earle, as if it were principally maintained on her side in the hope of doing her cousin good, and she felt suddenly an uncomfortable half-conviction that the style of talk, which actually passed between them, would not come up to Miss Ash's standard of faithfulness.

There was no help for it, however ; Miss Ash had noticed Alice's glance towards her side of the room, and she was now beckoning to Caroline, and ostentatiously clearing a place for the young ladies on the sofa by her side. Caroline was obliged to lead her cousin across the room, and bury herself during the rest of the evening in a somewhat dark corner, and among a set of people, who, though interesting enough a week ago, had been gradually falling in her estimation since the hope of forming more brilliant acquaintances,

under her uncle's patronage, had dawned upon her.

With all this, Caroline was not a hypocrite; she was only very vain, and profoundly ignorant of her own heart. She had been accustomed all her life to use phrases without understanding them, and having been for some time patronized and directed by a certain set of kind, but not very wise people, she adopted their prejudices, and fancied that she was a sharer in their real goodness.

Her gratitude towards her old friends, however, was warm enough to make her displeasure melt before their cordial smile of welcome, and to induce her to glide with a good grace into the accustomed topics of talk. These were new enough to Alice to awaken her interest, and cause her to join the conversation, now and then, with some animation. The Misses Ash were holding a little court of enquiry in their remote corner of the room, concerning the assembled guests, and ques-

tioning rather hotly the claims of some among the number to admittance into Mrs. Warren's select evening assemblies. Alice felt that the reasons for and against were at least curious. At last a name was mentioned that had always a special interest for Alice's ears, and as she bent forward to hear more distinctly, she felt that she was well repaid for having crossed the room.

"So," observed a young lady, in a tone of disappointment, "the Meyers were not asked, after all; Mrs. Warren promised she would ask them; and it would have been very nice to have had them here."

"My dear, she acted by my advice," the elder Miss Ash answered, bridling; "I took upon myself to tell her faithfully that it would not do."

"But why not?" persisted the first speaker. "I always understood that Mr. Meyer was a very good man, quite decided."

"Decided, but not sound, my dear; consider

how important it is that dear Mrs. Warren should get among sound people, and I assure you Mr. Barret is convinced of it—poor Mr. Meyer is not sound at all.”

“I knew that before,” cried Caroline, proud of her enlightenment; “I heard Mr. Barret say so a long time ago; there is something or other he does not believe in, I am almost afraid it is the devil—yes, I fancy that is it; Mr. Barret thinks that Mr. Meyer does not believe in the devil.”

“How very shocking!” exclaimed Mr. Meyer’s advocate; “then, of course, one would not wish him to be asked to a party; but I had no idea of such a thing; my brother thinks very highly of Mr. Meyer. You know he has gone into Mr. Gadstone’s bank lately, and he often has business to transact with Mr. Meyer; he finds him very kind. They say it is wonderful what influence Mr. Meyer has over all the young men who are engaged in the business.”

"My dear, you must put your poor dear brother on his guard," cried Miss Ash, eagerly ; "all will seem fair and good at first, but by-and-bye the poison will be introduced."

"Poison !" said Alice.

"I allude to error, my dear Miss Earle, *religious error* ; not that I pretend to understand of what nature Mr. Meyer's is. It is something very subtle, no doubt ; only a dear servant, armed at all points, like that sweet young man, Mr. Barret, could have detected it. Now there can be no doubt at all, I suppose, about Mr. Meyer's young son ; I have heard that he is—"

"My cousin," interrupted Alice. The tone would not have been loud for anyone else, but coming from her, it sounded emphatic enough to make Miss Ash hasten to alter her sentence.

"He is, no doubt, I am sure, a very, very," (Miss Ash's favorite epithet did not seem appropriate, but no other would come) "a very interesting young man."

Alice leant back in her seat, and wondered why she had taken the trouble to interfere. What could it signify what Miss Ash said of Max Earle? Her thoughts took holiday for a few moments. When they came back again, the conversation had left Mr. Meyer, and passed on to his partner in business and superior in wealth and consequence, Mr. Gadstone.

"He is here to-night—is he serious?" asked Alice, abruptly.

"He is dear Mrs. Warren's brother," said Miss Ash, "and she has great hopes of him; they say he is a very keen man of business and very clever in making a bargain, but I don't know that he is any worse for that; many very religious people are; Mr. Barret thinks it a great thing to shew the world that the keenest and most practical minds can be brought under the influence of religious truth."

"I wish poor Fred would take example by Mr. Gadstone, then," said Caroline, with a

sigh ; “if he were both religious and likely to make a great deal of money, it would be all one could wish.”

“Making the most of both worlds, in short,” said the youngest Miss Ash, with a happy quotation of the title of a book she had been reading.

“Ah, my dears,” continued the elder sister, “that is the way to talk to young men ; shew them that it is their *interest*—their interest for this world—to be religious, and you will soon gain them over.”

“I wonder whether Mr. Meyer would think that an appeal to self-interest could have anything to do with—with holiness,” said Alice, hesitating a little over her word, and yet not caring to substitute another.

“My dear Miss Earle,” cried Miss Ash, appealingly, “when we have been told, on good authority, that Mr. Meyer’s views are not sound, is it wise to bring them forward ?”

“But about Mr. Gadstone,” said Alice,

glad to retreat, "what has he done to deserve your good opinion?"

"He took the chair at the last Missionary Meeting, and he has subscribed a guinea to the Jew's Society, and he shows altogether, Mrs. Warren thinks, an appreciation of the right views, which is very encouraging," answered Miss Ash, triumphantly.

"I wonder whether he has rebuilt those wretched tumble-down cottages that belong to him at Fairbourne," said Alice, "and whether he has done away with the toll at the head of the bridge at Newlands, which prevents the poor people from getting to church."

"I really don't know about that," answered Miss Belinda Ash, the youngest and gentlest of the sisters; "but, my dear, you know we must not despise the day of small things."

"Especially not with such a man as Mr. Gadstone," interposed her more eager elder sister; "only think what good he might do if

he went heart and soul into the work, with his means; we ought not to leave a stone unturned to gain him. If only he could be brought to marry some really pious young woman, who would lead him in the right way? It is a question of importance to all the religious societies in Kingsmills, whom he will choose. Why they say he will be the richest man in the county soon, and think, what a position his wife will have; what responsibilities, what opportunities of doing good!"

Miss Ash was looking at Caroline during the latter part of her speech with a very meaning smile, and Caroline appeared to be seized with a sudden tremulous motion of her head, for the scarlet beads rattled incessantly. Alice could not help wondering whether such speculations were usual among her cousin's friends, and a feeling of curiosity prompted her to glance towards the upper end of the room, where her father still stood,

engaged in conversation with the very gentleman, who was furnishing the topic of their discourse. Alice had seen this same Mr. Gadstone once or twice before, without having bestowed any especial attention upon him, but now she was prompted to look at him with criticising eyes. How common he looked standing beside her father; what coarse, inapt hands he had, hanging down stiffly at each side; what a heavy face! It would have been nothing but a mass of flesh and bone, if it had not been for two expressions which gave something of life to it—the stolid self-importance that characterised the brow and chin; the slow cunning that looked out of the corners of the moist round eyes, and lurked in the lines of the prominent mouth. From his face Alice glanced up at her father's; she had wondered already what he could have found to talk about so long with such a companion; her surprise changed to sorrow as she studied his face. Anyone less acquainted with all its

changes than Alice, might have seen nothing unusual there. She saw anxiety in the slightly contracted brow and painful suspense in the fixed eyes and slightly trembling lips. The proud head was bent a little forward, too, as if to catch each word as it fell slowly from the other's thick lips.

What could Mr. Gadstone have to say of consequence enough to make Major Earle bend down to hear it?

Before Alice had half done with the question, the conversation she was watching came to an end. Mr. Gadstone thrust his hands into his pockets; Major Earle lifted up his head, and sighed; there was a moment's silence between them, and then Mr. Gadstone, who had partly turned away, came back, and appeared to address some short question to Major Earle. Alice saw her father's face brighten as he heard; he turned and looked round the room; she felt that he was looking for her, and the nervous anxiety that always oppressed

her, when she came in contact with her father, made her hastily withdraw her eyes, afraid of being supposed to have watched him. When she had gained courage to look up again, there was a little movement round her, and she rose hastily to meet her father, who, followed by Mr. Gadstone, was approaching the sofa on which she had been seated.

"My daughter, Mr. Gadstone," Major Earle said, coldly, as Alice drew near; but when Alice curtseyed as coldly, she read dissatisfaction at her manner in her father's eye. He followed her when she returned to her seat, and, bending down over her, he said in a low voice: "Alice, you must talk."

Now Major Earle knew, and Alice was conscious that he knew, that she could talk, and talk brilliantly at times; but he did not know, as she did, that it must be on topics that interested her, and to people between whom and herself she could at least fancy a connecting link of thought; on other conditions she

was absolutely dumb. Her father thought her perverse, strangers thought her proud; she wondered at, and suffered from her own incapacity, but could not conquer it. To-night, with her father standing close by, waiting for the first word, with Mr. Gadstone's heavy face and cunning eyes looking down upon her, with the inquisitive faces of all the ladies on the sofa watching how she would avail herself of such an unlooked-for chance of captivating the richest bachelor in Kingsmills, even her usual slender stock of small-talk failed; she absolutely could not think of anything to say.

"My dear, if it had been you instead of your cousin," whispered Miss Ash to Caroline, "you might have been able to put in a word in season; what a pity it is!"

Caroline answered this remark with a nervous twist of her head, which once more set all the tremulous red beads in movement, and the hero of the evening turned his eyes from

Alice's averted face and drooping figure, and fixed them on her with as strong a look of approbation as his dull features could convey.

"Your younger daughter, I think?" he said, looking up at Major Earle.

"My niece," was the answer, given with a haughtiness that would have extinguished anyone with a grain of sensitiveness.

"Oh, indeed!" said Mr. Gadstone, composedly, removing with one hand a flounce of Alice's dress, which took up a place on the sofa, and seating himself heavily between the two young ladies.

Miss Ash, from her chair opposite, telegraphed a signal of encouragement and congratulation to Caroline; but Caroline's heart fluttered. What should she say? she never had much presence of mind, she knew that something edifying was expected of her, but the word in season would not come. It was her turn to be embarrassed now. The silence

was infectious, a nervous constraint crept over that part of the room. The hostess fidgetted; the rich Mr. Gadstone, seated between the two most beautiful girls in Kingsmills, and unable to make either of them speak to him, began to look foolish and feelsulky. Alice glanced up at her father's face and saw there a depth of displeasure, vexation, almost dismay, that made her heart sink and her face fade into deeper shadow and more absolute stillness. At that moment a door opened behind her, a fascination she could not resist made her turn and look. Her eye rested on a figure entering the room, and her whole face lighted up with an expression of relief, confidence, and courage. She sprang from her seat, and, with both hands stretched out, hastened to meet the new comer, exclaiming :

“Sebastion ! Sebastion ! oh, I am so glad you are come.”

It was the same tone, the same gesture with which, in their childish days, she had so

often gone to him for help in time of need ; and Sebastian, who had a hundred times pictured to himself what his greeting would be, fancied that he knew quite well how much of welcome this one was worth. He took the little white trembling hands in his without a word, and looked quietly round the room to discover what service he could render to her.

“Come and speak to papa,” Alice said, and Sebastian smiled an understanding smile, touched with just a little edge of bitterness.

It was pleasant to be of use in helping Alice out of even a conversational dilemma, but it was hardly worth coming from Africa for that.

His sudden appearance had the desired effect at all events. Major Earle’s uneasiness and displeasure vanished instantly at sight of his nephew. He gave him a most cordial and eager greeting, and the dullness that had threatened to settle down over the evening

changed into an animated bustle of congratulation and welcome. The Kingsmills people, in general, were not as indifferent to Sebastian's deeds and rising fame as his relatives in Stone Street had shown themselves to be.

While he was exchanging greetings with such of the guests as were known to him, scraps of information, respecting his past adventures and history, were circulating among the less favoured ones.

He has been travelling in the centre of Africa. He distinguished himself very much in the last war. He saved a child from being drowned in the harbour here when he was quite a boy. He is the heir to Earle's Court, is he not? I wonder whether Major Earle is really glad to see him. What a handsome young man! Hush, he hears you, and he is quite as proud-looking as the rest of the Earles.

Before the excitement had time to die away, Major Earle summoned Alice to take

leave, and persisted in his intention, in spite of all the hostess' eager remonstrances against breaking up the party so early.

Meanwhile, Caroline, under Miss Ash's auspices, had been successful in drawing Mr. Gadstone into conversation, and was just beginning a playful attack upon him in favour of the Sunday-school bazaar, when her uncle cruelly cut it short by offering her his own arm to take her to the carriage. Alice was left in Sebastian's charge ; there was a little delay in the hall, the carriage did not come at the precise moment when it ought to have done. Major Earle impatiently stood out on the steps with Caroline, in spite of the cold March wind. Alice retreated into the house, and sat down on the stairs under the lamp. Sebastian, who did not at all care to talk to her, leaned back against the wall opposite, and took his first long look at a face, which it seemed to him that he had never ceased to see, and satisfied himself that four years had

not stolen away or altered one familiar line. For a moment, they were so still, that Sebastian could not avoid hearing the murmur of voices in the drawing-room above, and by degrees the voices of two speakers, who were progressing towards the head of the stairs, reached him distinctly.

"So," he heard one lady say, "there is an end of the aristocratic match that Mrs. Warren thought to bring about for her vulgar brother; it is a pity she talked so much of it."

"But you don't know yet," answered the other, "what turn things may take. Though the rich heir has come back, he may not have changed his mind. You know they say he went away, four years ago, because his uncle wanted him to marry the daughter, and he did not choose. She must have been almost a child then."

"I wonder she showed so plainly that she was glad to see him back, if that is

the case ; and yet it is natural she should be anxious. She won't have a farthing when her father dies, will she ? ”

By this time the speakers were half way down the stairs, and Alice rose to make way for them. She took her cousin's offered arm, and walked quickly to the door, but he could not tell from her quiet face whether she had heard what he had done or not. He worried himself in silence all the way home, with conjectures on the subject, and with remorse for the want of tact he had shown in not taking her away sooner.

“ You will come and see us the first thing to-morrow, of course, Sebastion,” Major Earle said, as the carriage stopped at the door of Miss Earle's little house in Stone Street, and Sebastion and Caroline prepared to alight.

“ And bring Ruth with you,” Alice said, leaning forward to shake hands ; “ I have not seen her for several weeks, and we all know

you can do as *you* like with Aunt Harriet."

"I am glad you don't forget how to make use of me," Sebastian said, smiling again.

Ruth was waiting to open the door for them, and Sebastian was not so much engrossed with his own affairs as to forget to condole with her on the long dull evening she had had. He did not know how very far it was from being ended then. When he, after pacing his room for about two hours, was beginning to think of going to bed, when Caroline had dropped asleep with visions of Miss Ash and the bazaar, and Mr. Gadstone's new white house on the hill, mingling in her dreams, Ruth crept softly down stairs again, with the key of the house-door in her hand. A stone thrown dexterously against her window was the signal that brought her down, and when she had opened the door, she found, as she expected, her eldest brother waiting to be let in.

He drew off his boots before he entered,

and stepped gently into the hall; the light of Ruth's nearly burned-out candle showed a handsome, acute face, on which the traces of recent excitement and a slight shade of remorse were blended.

"Come, Ruth," he said, as she fastened the door, "I acknowledge that I am rather late to-night, but you need not look so dark about it, you see I have taken off my boots, and I defy a soul in the house to hear."

"It does no good," said Ruth, sturdily. "I don't believe mamma ever goes to sleep till she knows that you are safe in the house. I don't believe she'll sleep a wink to-night, and we have all had a wretched evening because of you."

"It would not have been any better if I had been here," answered her brother, his face darkening as he listened, "and I should have had a wretched evening. Why should not I go out as well as anyone else, why can't they trust me, I have not been doing any harm."

"Oh, Frederick! what is the use of talking like that," cried Ruth, "when you know so well how it all is?"

"There is one thing I am getting to know pretty well," he interrupted, "that there is no such thing as entering this house without being worried out of one's life. I never come in without hearing that something has gone wrong. I keep out of the way to avoid hearing."

"Well, at all events, we must not stay whispering now," returned Ruth, "or mamma will be sure that there is something wrong, and she will be getting out of bed in the cold to see. You may take the piece of candle to undress by, I can manage in the dark. I am less likely to make a noise than you are."

"Did Alice come into the house to-night?" whispered the brother, as he took the candle out of Ruth's hand.

"Nay, indeed, I shall not tell you anything about Alice to-night, you don't deserve it," she answered, indignantly.

“Well, let it alone, then ; I don’t care,” was the somewhat sullen reply, and the brother and sister separated for the night.

The last sound in the house was the gentle closing of Mrs. Brandon’s room-door, at which she had been standing shivering with cold and weariness, while she watched her son’s noiseless ascent of the stairs at two o’clock in the morning.

CHAPTER III.

“O’er a garden bowered close,
With plaited alleys of the trailing rose ;
Long alleys, falling down to twilight grots,
Or opening upon level plots ;
Of crowned lilies standing near
Purple spiked lavender.”

TENNYSON.

EARLE’S COURT was a somewhat gloomy, old-fashioned red-brick house, built in the picturesque style of Queen Elizabeth’s reign. A lawn in front, with two avenues of stately old trees sloped down to the river, on which the town of Kingsmills was built ; and behind, enclosed with high brick walls, lay a stiff quaint garden, with terraced walks, and rows upon rows of espalier apple-trees, and here and there a broken-nosed statue, or a sun-dial

held up by the hands of fantastic figures long ago moss-grown and weather-beaten out of all recognition of their allegorical characters. Whole tribes of birds, driven away from all their other haunts in the neighbourhood by the noise of the manufactory wheels, or by the rising up everywhere of fresh rows of houses, took refuge in the thick trees in front, or in the crevices and corners of the old garden walls, and paid for their safe lodging by making such a clamour of music all through the spring days, that only Major Earle's over-sensitive ear could detect, through it, the not very distant noise of the town, or the murmur of voices and clang of machinery from the obnoxious square of ground, only three fields off, where Mr. Meyer's manufactory chimnies protruded their black faces through the trees.

It was a place well fitted to test, by the impressions it produced, the character and temper of its inmates.

By the help of the birds, and the high walls,

and the overshadowing trees, it was not difficult to wander from morning till night in the garden, or to sit out musing on the lawn, and wrapt in fancies of the past, and fed by country sounds and garden-perfumes, to gather no hint of the busy, modern, struggling life, the signs of which were advancing every day nearer and nearer, setting the quaint, fair picture in a huge black frame of smoke and brick-work. On the other hand, it was just as easy to see nothing in the garden but leaves crumpled up by smoke, or flowers profaned by manufactory-dust, and to lose the soothing impression from the still shade of the trees, by perpetually catching glimpses, through their foliage, of the coal-barges as they passed up and down the river.

Equally characteristic were the thoughts which the old house suggested to the passers-by. Some contented themselves with wondering how any proprietor could be so indifferent to modern improvement as to let the

old-fashioned stiff gardens, and weather-stained house remain untouched, to be shamed by its gay neighbours ; others lamented that there was no prospect of such a large space of ground being turned to more profitable account. Some few, wandering by the river side on summer evenings after their day's labour in the hot town, would linger long to look over the water at the two avenues of trees and the smooth fresh lawn and the quaint stone copings of the red house, and feel, they hardly knew why, that there were few things they would less willingly have spared from their lives than this one scene, that, in the busy present, looked at them with the quiet face of the past.

Still and changeless as the old house looked, however, there had been no lack of troubles and changes within. The peace that rested in garden shade and projecting gallery was only surface deep ; it had never found its way into the house, or penetrated as far as the

hearts of the inhabitants. The Earles had long had the reputation of being a self-willed, proud, gloomy-tempered race, apt to quarrel with their neighbours, and not particularly inclined to live happily among themselves. For several generations there had been alternately a spendthrift and a miser at the head of the house ; the one following in regular succession to undo the work of the other, and so keep up the family prosperity at a certain average height. Once, and only once, there had been a crisis of danger, when the old house really ran some risk of falling into new hands ; it was in the last few years of the life of Major Earle's grandfather, who had shown a greater talent for spending money and mismanaging his affairs than had yet been developed in the family. If he had lived ten years longer than he did, the site of Earle's Court would now have been bearing a row of whitewashed villas, or a bone or colour-mill. The guardian spirit of the place interfered to

avert such calamity ; the old spendthrift died, and his son, coming into his property early in life, showed a decision and enterprise as much above the character which it was his turn to enact, as his father had exceeded in extravagance the preceding examples of his. Not satisfied with his traditionary lot of saving, he had the spirit to think of earning. He sold off as much of the land as was necessary to pay his father's debts, shut up the old house, and went away to make his fortune in India. It was at the time when fortunes were made in India, and when people did not care much to ask how. He came back before he was a middle-aged man, with enough, as he thought, to buy back all the old lands twice over. The house was opened in greater splendour than ever, but the old consequence of the family, and a large share of the old lands, had passed into newer and more vigorous hands. Mr. Earle found rivals near his throne, and neither his money nor his strong

hereditary will, could enable him to drive them away. The quiet, dingy old port of Kingsmills had risen suddenly into consequence; manufactories had been established round; large docks were being constructed in the estuary of its slow river; fields that had been sold for a few pounds could not now be repurchased for thousands. Mr. Earle struggled, quarrelled, and intrigued for a few years to secure a larger margin in which to entrench his family pride, and then gave up the contest with sullen dissatisfaction in his heart, and shut himself up within the still uninvaded domain, to rule his family all the more arbitrarily, because the range of his power was more limited than he had expected it to be. His was one of those restless, exacting wills that will not be satisfied with anything less than the utter annihilation of character in all around them; no minute circumstance of daily life was so small that he did not wish to regulate it; no recess of the heart of

wife, or child, so sacred, that he would not willingly have meddled there and ruled. As his children grew up, however, there was one so like him in mind and character, with thoughts and purposes so exactly set to be the echo of his own, that a sort of partnership in power became possible between them. This one favoured person was his eldest daughter, Harriet Earle. She grew up beautiful, wilful, and proud; but with a deeper heart and a finer tact, she stood as interpreter between the rest of the world and her father, and gave something of happiness and domestic love to the latter years of his life. His sons had naturally been rebellious under such a rule as his. The eldest showed early that the order of succession in the Earle family was not likely to be contradicted in his case. His extravagance and folly provoked his father to banish him from home before he was quite a man; he entered the army, had the good fortune to marry an heiress, and held very little

intercourse with his family afterwards. The second son, Arthur, with a degree less strength of character, had more tact, or some greater power of inspiring affection. His father showed a much larger charity for his failings, and his sister took him under her special protection, and was always on the watch to further his interest and screen him from his father's displeasure. It is true, they were always quarrelling; the brother was always chaffing against his sister's power, always scorning her advice and thwarting her wishes, and then, when he could no longer do without her, coming back, and putting his head under the yoke he professed so to hate; and yet he was the one object of interest in her life; she loved him better than she did her father, better by far than she loved her meek younger sister, who lived in peace near her, because she had never had a wish of her own in her life. Peace, in herself or with others, was not the element in which Harriet Earle flourished;

she liked contention better. Love had no rest for her; and she counted no heart her own, unless she could be constantly probing it, testing her power over it, and sounding it down to its very depths. Her brother, Arthur, weak and changeable, was just the person to weary most completely of her exactions. Sometimes, when his will had been unusually thwarted, and his indolent temper harrassed past bearing, he used to say that he wished he could do something for which there could be no hope of his being forgiven, and then he should feel free. At last the time and the temptation came, and he hit upon the very thing to do, after which there could be no turning back. One summer morning he left his father's house with precisely his usual careless good bye and lazy stroll down the avenue, and in the evening his friends heard that he had married the daughter of a certain Mr. Maxwell, a tradesman in Kingsmills, whom Mr. Earle hated beyond anyone else in the world, because the

greater part of the Earle lands had fallen into his possession, and he had steadily refused to give them up.

Harriet Earle's love suffered even more than her father's pride, and it would have been harder for her to forgive the injury. She grieved somewhat because her brother had disgraced himself by a low marriage; but the real sting lay in this, that after all she had done for him, after all the battles she had fought on his behalf, he had thrown her esteem and love away without a thought, for the sake of a little girl whom he had only previously seen four times in his life. The wound sank deep, and by dint of constant probing she never let it heal. Years passed on, and she was left alone in the gloomy old house with her morose father. The younger sister married, acting wilfully for the first and only time in her life, and choosing for herself. Harriet had honest true-love offered to her more than once, but she shut her heart

against it, complaining to heaven all the time of her lonely lot. She would not, perhaps *could* not, have forgiven her brother, but there was one thing that she longed for night and day, and that was, that he should have to come to her for help ; she would have helped him with the last farthing of her possessions, with the last drop of her life, but she would have reproached him all the time, and made the taste of her benefits bitterer than gall. Arthur had perhaps had experience enough to know this, or else his new relationship and responsibilities had given him a more independent spirit. He was soon involved in greater difficulties and straights than ever, but no word of submission came from him now to those at home who were waiting for it.

His idleness and extravagance speedily exhausted the patience of his hard, money-loving father-in-law ; and how he and his wife and children, for he had two sons, contrived to

live when he had been cast out of a second home, was a problem over which his sister pondered constantly with pain, and yet, with a certain sort of hope. After many years she heard that he had died abroad after a very short illness, and that his widow, who had been hardly used by her father ever since he had discovered how disadvantageously her aristocratic marriage was likely to turn out, was endeavouring to maintain herself and her two sons by needlework at Paris. Miss Earle's resolution was taken as soon as ever she heard the news. Her old love for her brother sprang up again fresher than ever, and the old jealousy that was always twin with her love. She felt as if no one but herself had any right to mourn for him, any right to cherish what he had left behind; the children must belong to her, it scarcely entered into her head that their mother had anything to do with them, they had been her brother's, and now they were hers. She

persuaded her father to set off at once to bring the little orphans home, and one day Mrs. Arthur Earle coming back from a short walk with her youngest boy, found the two people of whom in the world she was most afraid, in possession of her little room, and in conversation with her eldest son. She was not, Miss Earle saw in a moment, a very broken-hearted widow: she had been carrying the little boy up the steep stairs when she entered; her face was flushed with exercise and had a smile of motherly pride upon it, so that she looked still quite fresh and fair. She had been the courageous little bread-winner for the family, for several years, and though she had liked her husband well enough, she had come to know exactly what he was worth, and could not in her heart of hearts think him a very great loss. There was nothing in the expression of her face, therefore, to open a spring of sympathy in the hearts already closed against her, and when

her father and sister-in-law opened to her the purpose that had brought them there, she was no match for them in argument, or in strength of will. There was no passion in her character, only quiet affection and steady sense. Her reason forced her to acquiesce in the truth of the statements Miss Earle brought before her so pitilessly ; she knew, without being told, how insufficient a guardian she was for Mr. Earle's grandsons ; how hard and narrow her father's views of help would be, if he did offer her help ; and how cordially her husband himself had despised the position into which his sons must sink, if they were left to the charge of her own friends. She was ambitious enough, too, to like the prospect of rank and wealth for them ; she had always looked on them, on the eldest especially, as better than herself.

Mr. Earle and his daughter prescribed conditions and made promises, and she sat still, saying very little, while every now and

then heavy tears rolled down from her cheeks upon the bright, golden curls of the little head that nestled close to her arm.

At length, when Miss Earle's temper had been fretted almost beyond endurance, she lifted up her face and spoke.

"Would you go away from me, for your own and your brother's good, Sebastion?" she said, faintly, looking through tearful eyes at her eldest son.

The boy had been observing his mother and his aunt for some time, and he knew well enough what was going on. He turned to give one more look at the strangers before he spoke, and his younger brother answered for him.

"No, no, no!" he cried, passionately throwing his arms round his mother's neck; "we will not leave you for anything—"

"But one of you must go," said the mother again—"I can't do justice to you both, Sebastion—one of you must go."

The words came out quickly and painfully, and the arm that supported the little boy was drawn tighter round him. His brother saw the gesture and it gave the determining weight to the balance he was poising in his childish mind. He knew how hard his mother worked, he had seen her deny herself food that there might be enough for him and his brother. If one went away there would be less need, and if any one went he must go, and not Max. His mother could not do without Max. She always took him out with her everywhere, while he was often left at home. He pressed his lips very tightly together when he had done thinking, walked up to his aunt, and held out his hand to her :

“I will go with you,” he said.

It was a moment of triumph for Miss Earle, sweeter than she had ever tasted in her life before. The child had chosen *her* instead of his mother. He had returned to the allegiance

from which his father had broken. She never forgot *that* in all her future intercourse with him, and often as in after-years his character troubled and baffled her, she had always that one salient point to fall back upon.

Her reception of him at the first moment was so warm as almost to satisfy his mother's anxious heart; and after that little scene between the aunt and nephew the conditions were easily settled. Mrs. Earle agreed to bring Sebastian the next day to the hôtel in Paris where his grandfather was staying, and never again to interfere in his education or exercise any authority over him whatever.

CHAPTER IV.

"Visions of childhood, stay, oh stay,
Ye were so sweet and wild."

LONGFELLOW.

WHEN Sebastion was brought the next day to the hôtel, Miss Earle did not come forward to receive him herself from his mother's hands, as the poor woman had assured herself that she would do. It was not indifference that made her keep out of the way. She was afraid of having her jealousy aroused by the sight of any parting tears, and from the moment she adopted Sebastion, she set herself to forget that there was any other person in the world who had a claim on

his love besides herself. The child, young as he was, seemed to understand her feelings ; he never shed a tear in her presence ; he never made the slightest reference to anything that had ever happened in his old home. When he was settled at Earle's Court he set about finding plays and employments for himself, and pursued them steadily, without asking help or sympathy from anyone. Miss Earle, with all her watching and vigilance, never got beyond a certain point in his confidence ; she could never make out whether he were happy or not, whether he ever thought about his mother or brother, or even what his feelings were towards herself. One thing only was plain, that, child as he was, he had strength of character to go on his own way and develop himself according to his nature, without being oppressed and overborne by the peculiar influence of the household which had proved so injurious to others. If he ever pined for the affection and companion-

ship that had surrounded his childhood, he made no confidants of his pain, except perhaps the trees and statues of the old garden, or such quaint nooks of the house as he had especially appropriated to himself. As he grew older his greatest delight was to wander as far as possible from home, exploring the country round, or loitering about the docks at Kingsmills, talking to the sailors.

There were two, and only two, places in Kingsmills where he had been expressly forbidden to go ; one was the house of his grandfather, Mr. Maxwell, in the town, and the other was the incompleated pile of tall red buildings and the square open yard leading to the river, which people were beginning to call Mr. Meyer's manufactory. Sebastian never disobeyed his grandfather's command in either case ; but the prohibition excited his curiosity, and he found more interest than he would otherwise have done, in running down to the last of the Earle's Court

fields on the town side, and watching the gradual rise of the chimneys and the progress of the work which was going on beyond the boundary. He came to know Mr. Meyer's face, too, in time, and his cheery, frank voice reached him as he passed and repassed through the yard, having something to say to every one who came near him. This was the first characteristic of Mr. Meyer that Sebastion noticed, and he settled it in his own mind that he did not like it. Young as he was he had already imbibed the unsociable temperament and fastidious pride that had made the Earles unpopular for many generations. Very soon a circumstance occurred, which changed this early curiosity about Mr. Meyer and his doings into a strong and absorbing interest. One day Sebastion was strolling about alone in the garden, and he saw Mr. Meyer come up the avenue holding the hand of a little golden-haired boy, at sight of whom Sebastion's heart stood still. He followed them into the house at a distance, and saw the

door of his grandfather's library shut behind them. They stayed for an hour, and Sebastian, sitting on the stairs, heard angry voices coming from within; he knew how loud they must be talking to be heard through the heavy oak-door. His aunt called him to come up stairs just as the door opened again, and all that day such a treble gloom rested on her face that even Sebastian's courage could not venture on a question. Before night, however, he had possessed himself of the news he sought from other sources; it was given without any softening of sympathy or interest, in plain straight-forward words. His mother, he was told, was going to be married to that Mr. Meyer, the vulgar manufacturer he had so often heard his grandfather speak of with contempt, and she, with his brother Maxwell, were coming to live in the large red house close at hand. He pondered and pondered over the news, and the more he thought of it the more heavily a sense of loneliness and de-

sersion fell upon him. He felt more entirely cut off from his mother when he thought of her living in that hateful staring house, which offended his taste, and which he had promised never to enter, than he had done when he had pictured her still in the old home missing him from his accustomed place. He did not know, and his aunt took care that he never should know, how anxiously his mother had entreated for permission to resume her guardianship of him, or for leave sometimes to see him, and that she only refrained at length from pressing her claim, when she saw that, by continued interference, she was in danger of forfeiting for him the inheritance which everyone now said would certainly be his. She believed that he was happy and very dearly prized, and she never forgot that if she separated him from his father's friends, she had not anything very brilliant to offer in place of what he would have to resign. Perhaps, if she could have looked into his heart, she would have seen that

the injury her supposed neglect did there was what no inheritance could pay for. Sebastian did not pine away, and become fretful and weak-spirited, under the sense of loneliness that grew upon him; neither did he grow hardened and selfish, but his faith was injured; a morbid distrust of his power to awaken or retain affection grew upon him; not defined at first, for he had too healthy a nature to be much given to self-inspection; but it lay in his heart, the bitter seed of future bitter fruit.

There was much in his life for the next two years to nourish in him this unchildlike characteristic.

His mother, Mrs. Meyer we must call her now, had received from her first husband a very formidable impression of Miss Earle's jealous temper, and of the penalties she could inflict on those against whom it was excited, and she lived in constant dread of bringing trouble on Sebastian by any over-affectionate look or word of hers. The fear made her

very cautious in everything she did ; she would turn away her head and hurry past if she met Sebastion on the road riding with his grandfather, or sitting beside his aunt in the family carriage, and only turn round, when he was nearly out of sight, to strain her eyes after him, and bid little Maxwell observe how grand his elder brother was. Even when she met him alone, she denied herself the pleasure of speaking to him, for fear of tempting him to tell an untruth if he were asked about it, or obliging him to disobey his grandfather. Sebastion saw the averted face and hurrying step, and he did not know how she indemnified herself for these acts of self-denial, by laying all sorts of ingenious traps for seeing him many times a day, unseen herself, and by treasuring up any scrap of information she could possibly gain about his ways and sayings.

Sebastion was ingenious, too ; before long he discovered a way of seeing his mother

without disobeying his grandfather, or awakening his aunt's jealous displeasure. Sometimes, but not very often, in the winter evenings of the first year after his mother's marriage, Sebastian used to creep through the hedge in his grandfather's field, and let himself down into the great yard where the manufactory and the manager's house stood. The house fronted the river, but there were windows at the back which looked into the yard. One of these was the parlour window, and Sebastian discovered that the shutters of this window were often not closed till quite late in the evening. It was Mr. Meyer's fancy to have them left open. He liked, when he was sitting in his office, or passing from room to room in the manufactory, or walking about the yard, to see the warm inviting light from his house shining out into the darkness, reminding him of those who were waiting for him there; and this fancy enabled Sebastian to gain a clearer idea than he could have gained in any other way

of the sort of home from which he was shut out. There were figures enough loitering about the yard, to cause his to pass unobserved, and he used often to put his face quite close to the window and look fairly in. He got to know the appearance of the room quite well, the homely, but cheerful-looking furniture, the bright lamp, the well-spread tea-table, and the most usual position into which his mother's figure fell as she sat by the fire, working ; while Max, on a stool near, close nestled among the folds of her dress, turned up his face to hers, and talked and talked till Sebastian wondered how one person could ever find so much to talk about. When he resumed his visits the next winter a change had taken place in the scene. A little daintily-curtained cradle had taken Max's place by his mother's side, and Max sat at the foot of it, every now and then peeping in with a look of proud guardianship on his round childish face.

How stiff and cold the rooms at Earle's

Court appeared to Sebastian, when he crept back in time to take his place silently at the table after his grandfather's dinner ; how harsh Miss Earle's voice sounded to him when she found fault with the servants, or made little dry remarks about the news of the day ; how monotonously dull the long silent evenings seemed.

These first two years were, however, the darkest of Sebastian's childhood ; before the next winter a change had taken place in the household, which proved of great advantage to him. After many years of silence and estrangement, the eldest son, Major Earle, found it convenient to ask a favour of his father and sister. His wife had died, leaving him the charge of one little girl, the last of several children who had sickened and died before their mother. In despair of seeing the child thrive if left to the charge of servants, he conquered his pride so far as to write a very humble letter to his sister, entreating permis-

sion to send his daughter to pay a long visit to her grandfather, in order to try if the native Earle's Court air would not give her a little of the hereditary Earle vigour.

"She will amuse Sebastian," Miss Earle said, as she read the letter and passed it to her father.

That remark settled the question, and on that plea little Alice was permitted to enter her father's home.

Sebastian did not take much notice of his cousin the first evening after her arrival, when she sat shrinking, tearful, and frightened in a remote corner of the high-backed sofa in the drawing-room; but the next day he chanced to meet her in the hall alone as he was returning from one of his long country rambles laden with spoil. She looked wistfully at a bright flowering branch of a tree which he had brought home, and, as none of the elders were near to see, he lifted her up into one of the deep-seated hall-chairs, and spread his

treasures out, one by one, at her side. Sebastian's impressions of Alice always dated from that day. He could at any time of his after-life see her again as she looked then, filling up such a very small corner of the black oak chair, and taking the flowers from him one by one with an expression of grave wondering pleasure on her face; so much more fragile-looking herself than any of them, so small, so soft, so white.

From that hour they were close friends, and Alice ruled Sebastian as absolutely as she was herself ruled by everyone else in the house.

She made the most of her one little bit of power, and sometimes retaliated on Sebastian the injustice and caprice with which she was too frequently treated by the elders of the house, playing off little childish airs of petulance and reserve upon him, and causing him to rack his invention all the more anxiously for ways of winning her confidence.

Sebastian could never understand how it

was that, with all her gentle ingratiating ways, and with all the frightened efforts she made to win her grandfather's and aunt's love, she never succeeded in pleasing them as he did, who was conscious of never trying at all : he did not know that to people afflicted with a diseased self-love, there is nothing so displeasing as the very fear and anxiety which their own exactions always awaken in gentle impressible natures. Alice could not live near Miss Earle without suffering, and her character was injured by what she suffered, though not on the same side as Sebastian's. Her nature was one of those rare and precious ones, sweet to the very core, which no injustice can infect with a single taint of bitterness ; but she grew timid, and with failure of courage there came what always must come with it—failure in truth. The disease did not eat very deeply into her heart ; but the black spot was there, whether to be purged away by future suffering, or to spread and destroy all

the fair promise of her youth, was a problem to be worked out in future years.

In the meantime, Sebastion's championship shielded her from many troubles and made the inevitable ones tolerable. They were constantly together : when Alice was in disgrace and was sentenced to remain alone up stairs for punishment, it was Sebastion's great delight to save his share of fruit and cakes from dessert for her, and steal up stairs with them in the course of the evening to the nursery door, where she was always waiting for him ; then he used to tempt her out to sit on the dark stairs and divide the spoil.

Alice was never capricious or reserved on these occasions ; she used to open out her store of secret fancies under cover of the darkness, and Sebastion got a peep into a fantastic shadow-world, beautiful and fearful, where his cousin lived in thought.

On summer days the children passed much of their time in the garden, and the

quaint statues, the still walks, the old house itself, began to wear quite a new look to Sebastian from words which, now and then, Alice let fall about them. When Sebastian looked back on that part of his childhood, it seemed to be comprised in two pictures. A winter's evening, dark and cold, himself and Alice sitting in the deep recess of the staircase window, starlight outside and frozen fields, and one bright cheerful light from Mr. Meyer's window, streaming out across the snow ; they were always talking in Sebastian's vision, and Alice's face gleamed through the uncertain light, visionary and pale like some unsubstantial thing from the dream-land her words brought near ; or else it was a bright summer day, the garden in deep shadow and sunshine, the air full of the music of birds, and he was lifting Alice up that she might sit on the sun-dial, and peep down over its edge, for the hundredth time, at the twisted figures with battered faces and outstretched arms that formed its pedestal.

These pictures were so distinct, and memory held such a firm hold on them, perhaps, because the next change in Sebastian's life brought very different scenes and very various pictures.

He had always made up his mind, from the very first of his coming to Kingsmills, that he would be a sailor, and it chanced that this fancy agreed very well with his grandfather's views for him. Mr. Earle had gone out early into the world himself, and, as he fancied he had failed to make his sons what he wished them to be through over-education, he determined to bring up his grandson to rough it in what he called the good old way.

When Sebastian was about thirteen, a very old friend of his grandfather's, who was a captain in the navy, came to stay at Earle's Court. The ship he commanded was bound on an expedition to the Northern Seas, and Sebastian, after overhearing one conversation between this gentleman and his grandfather on

the subject of the voyage, took his resolution, and the next morning went with a determined face into Mr. Earle's study, to announce that he had chosen his profession for life, and to ask his grandfather to procure him a berth in his friend's ship. Mr. Earle liked the downright way of asking, and the few words in which the request was made; it brought him back to his own young days, when he had made sudden resolutions and carried them out with a high hand. When Miss Earle came down to breakfast, the question of Sebastian's future destiny was settled, and she saw by the expression of the two faces, which now and then looked so like each other, that for once opposition from her would be of no avail.

Before Sebastian sailed, he carried one more point on which his heart was fixed; he asked and obtained permission to pay a farewell visit at his mother's house. He contrived that it should be his last day on shore that he spent there, after his farewell to Earle's

Court and its inmates had been got over. He did not like to have to tell, even to Alice, what sort of a day he had had, and it was not till he had been a month at sea, and new experiences had deadened the pain of all the partings, that he quite liked to ask himself what his impressions had been. The day had passed like a dream; old faces and new so mixed together that he could hardly separate them in his remembrance. One thing, however, was painfully distinct amid the confusion; the old home had quite passed away, and he had not been able to discover that there was any want of him in the new.

Sebastion saw very little of Earle's Court or Kingsmills for many years after that; a seafaring life suited him exactly, and he was fortunate in having more active duty and more opportunities of distinguishing himself than often fall to the lot of beginners. The training he had had in self-command and in obedience stood him in good stead, and he was

very highly spoken of by his superiors several times. It occurred to him sometimes, to wonder whether anyone would care to hear about these praises, and the answer he gave himself checked any very vivid pleasure he might have had in them.

During the two or three brief intervals he passed on shore he never once saw Alice, who had been hastily removed from Earle's Court by her father, in consequence of some quarrel between himself and Miss Earle, and placed in a fashionable school in London. Sebastian thought, every time he returned to it, that the old house looked gloomier than ever; that his grandfather had become more harsh and exacting; his aunt more cold and careworn; and yet he had a kind of affinity with the place that made him regard it with kindness, and drew his thoughts back to it when he was absent. The familiar look of the lawn and gardens, the unchanged aspect of everything within the house, the brief smile that

came on his aunt's face at the sight of him, and came for no one else, made up the elements of a welcome which custom rendered dear. To Miss Earle, Sebastian's short visits were the only pleasures that varied her life. She did not grow happier as she grew older, and new cares pressed upon her. Her father, always saving, grew miserly in his old age; her sister and brother-in-law, overburdened with the cares of a large family and a small income, were always applying to her for help she could not give, and for advice which she knew would not be followed if given. It seemed hard to her and strange, that people who had love of their own, and a life in which she had no part, should think they had so clear a right to expect her to take part in their cares. She gave what help she could, with this dividing thought in her heart, and wondered why she got so little gratitude for it.

Old Mr. Earle died while Sebastian was at sea; the will he left behind him was charac-

teristic of most of the acts of his life ; it was framed to assert his own will and perpetuate his own prejudices, without much thought of justice or care for the real good of those who ought to have benefited by his bequests.

The chief part of the landed property was left to Major Earle for his life, and was then to pass entire to Sebastian. A large sum of money, the savings of many years, was divided unequally between Sebastian and Miss Earle ; Sebastian having by far the larger share, but not being allowed to come into possession of it till he had attained his twenty-fifth year. Mrs. Brandon, (Mr. Earle's youngest daughter) Alice, and Maxwell were entirely overlooked. Amongst those whose expectations this unjust will disappointed, Mrs. Meyer and her son suffered the least.

Mr. Meyer and Maxwell Earle were duly invited to the funeral and the reading of the will by Major Earle, who came immediately on his father's death to take possession of the

house; and, from this circumstance, Mrs. Meyer could not help cherishing a hope that old Mr. Earle might have repented of his long injustice on his death-bed, and done something to atone to her second son for the neglect with which he had treated him during his life. She awaited her husband's return from Earle's Court on the important day with some impatience, and met him in the hall with an anxious face. Mr. Meyer came in, looking more kindly and bright-tempered than usual.

"Well, Mary," he said, before she had time to frame a question, "I have enough for them all. Let us say no more about it. Sebastian is welcome to his money, and our Max is eldest son *here*, as he has always been."

Mrs. Meyer did not say a word more about it, or require further explanation. She knew her husband well; but she and Max talked it over a little that evening after tea, when Mr. Meyer had gone back to his work in the counting-house. They said very little about

the lost inheritance, but they dwelt fondly on the manner, sweeter and more cordial than ever, on the few warm words, by which, without formal explanations, the father had made the son understand that from that evening he was to take a yet more intimate place, and be regarded with a still higher consideration in his adopted home.

There was another home, however, where the news could not be so calmly received. Mr. and Mrs. Brandon, in their quiet rectory, had for years been accustoming themselves to look forward to a time when something, they did not quite like to specify what, should enable them to do a great many things, which in the meanwhile they were content to leave undone. To give their boys a good education, to let their pretty daughters have advantages and amusements suitable to their age, to pay all those bills that had gone on accumulating from year to year. They had referred all their anxieties and difficulties to that settling

time so long, that they hardly knew how to look at life when it came and passed them by, without bringing the expected succour. The blow fell very heavily indeed, and it happened, as is often the case, that the one who seemed the most able to bear it was the one to sink.

Mrs. Brandon, who had always seemed overwhelmed with anxiety and care in the little every-day troubles of life, showed a resignation and a quiet courage, when the bad news came, that took all her friends by surprise. Her husband, an impetuous, sunny-tempered man, with whom the world had hitherto appeared to go easily, was utterly stunned and oppressed by it. He told his wife that he could not bear the evil times that he saw coming, and he *did* not bear them ; he worried himself into a brain fever by dwelling on his pecuniary difficulties, and died, leaving his wife and children to bear them, or to get some one else to bear them, in their stead, as

best they might. Miss Earle was the person on whom the burden of these difficulties actually came; thus verifying her secret complaining thought, that the only relation in which she was ever to stand to others, was, that upon her the shadow of their *cares* always fell. People said and thought that it was quite a natural thing, that Miss Earle, now rich and independent, should offer an asylum to her widowed sister, and orphaned nephews and nieces; her doing so hardly seemed a meritorious act; it was only what she ought to do. No one took the trouble of estimating what the sacrifice actually was. All her life long, Harriet Earle had been longing for something that was to be quite her own. Once she had aimed high, she had thought of having one heart quite to herself, to rule it, and keep it, and reign in it absolutely; she had given up that dream and come down a long way now; but still, a house and a household to herself was something, some little hold on the

world—and *that*, too, she had to give up. If she could have given it utterly and herself, too; if she had hated her life, perhaps she would have found it again; found it, crowned and glorified; received the casket back again, with the missing jewel within; but such sort of giving did not lie within the compass of Miss Earle's heart. She did what was possible to her. She gave up her money, her independence, the peace of her failing days; but she kept back that one thing, that part of the price of the hand, which, ungiven, makes the gift accursed; she never forgot that she was giving.

And so there came contention into her house, a divided interest, a debtor and creditor account that could never be rightly balanced. Instead of the gratitude and devotion which seemed to be the right payment for her self-sacrifice, Miss Earle found herself regarded with fear and distrust by those whom she had benefited; and when she could no longer refrain from opening out the sore wound in her

heart, and claiming aloud her due, her sister's silent tears condemned her, and she could not look across her own room without being stabbed afresh by indignant glances from Ruth's black eyes. She deserved a better reward perhaps; and yet, if instead of fighting for, and claiming, the human love that never comes by claiming, she had been able to throw herself on the Infinite Divine Love, that was going out to her all the time; if she had known that after all she *had* something of her own; that Divine eyes watched her sacrifices, and Divine sympathy answered every throb of her heart, she need not have shrunk from her lot. Having the rich store of her Lord open to her, she might have forgiven the poor human debtor. Her saying would no longer have been "Pay me what thou owest," but "All that I have is thine," and then, perhaps then, the measure she meted would have been measured to her again, full measure, pressed down and brimming over would have been poured into her bosom.

So it might have been with her ; but it was not so, and the little house in Stone Street came to be what we have described it.

Sebastion returned to England six months after his grandfather's death, and found Major Earle and Alice just established at Earle's Court. He heard of his grandfather's bequests in his favour with more surprise than pleasure ; and with as much disapprobation for their injustice as any of those who were disappointed by them. He felt more alone than ever. There had never been much intimacy between him and his relations, but now a new subtle feeling of having injured them crept into his heart, and made it still more difficult for him to be at one with them. He fancied he could detect jealousy and dislike in Major Earle's carefully polite welcome ; he heard reproach in every tone of Mrs. Brandon's gentle, complaining voice ; he could not look at Miss Earle's face, with all its added lines of disappointment and bitterness, without a vague

feeling of self-reproach. Worse still, he fancied that there was a change in his mother's manner to him. A something in the home to which he had now free access, which made him feel less than ever a son of the house. He felt, every time he entered her presence, as if his mother said to him, by looks, if not by words, "You have got your good things in this world; you are rich and want nothing, but these others, who belong to me too, have only my love for wealth, and I cannot find it in my heart not to give them the largest share of that.

In spite of the uncomfortable feelings engendered by these suspicions, Sebastion stayed longer on shore at that time than he had done on previous visits. He lived with his aunt at Kingsmills, but went constantly backwards and forwards to Earle's Court, every time declaring that it should be the last, but always going again. He and Alice never quite determined whether or not they were to be on the old

terms of intimacy. Alice, just returned from school, was in the first delightful agitation of being installed the mistress of her father's house, and she was so fitful that it was impossible for Sebastian to calculate, when he visited her, what sort of reception he should meet with. Sometimes he found her hedged in with all the dignity and importance that a sixteen years' old mistress of a great house could possibly assume, too deep in weighty cares to listen to anything he might have to say to her. The next day a sense of her own incompetency had come upon her. She had forgotten some command of her father's, or Miss Earle had looked surprised at some of her doings from under her uplifted brows; and then Sebastian was welcome to walk up and down the garden with her for hours, while she poured out her troubles into his sympathising ears, and received his advice with all the humility and confidence of early days. By the next day a quite different mood would

probably have come on. Every-day cares and difficulties had fallen away from her, and she was transported into a region where Sebastian dimly felt his sympathy and interest would never be called on to follow. Some book would perhaps have been the magician that had worked the spell; Alice had been carried away to dream-land, and Sebastian did not possess the countersign that could have lured her back: he had to wait outside the charmed door, and very long and weary waiting it often was. After one of these fits of dreaming, Alice would suddenly wake up, with a thirst for knowledge strong upon her. Studies, that Sebastian did not even know by name, absorbed all her thoughts for the time; and in this mood, overcoming her timidity, she would often form sudden intimacies with one or other of the guests who frequented Earle's Court. Old learned men found pleasure in talking to the intelligent young girl who, for the time, showed such in-

terest in their pursuits, and such desire to be taught ; and Sebastion stood apart, listening while they "chattered," stony names

"Of shale and hornblende, rag, and trap, and tuff,
Amygdaloid and trachyte,"

and felt further away from Alice, more alone, than he had ever done when, on the lonely mast-head, with sky and sea around, memory had consoled him with cherished pictures.

He made up his mind at last quite suddenly, to go away, and did not give any particular reason for his resolution to anyone. He met with little opposition, for as he was not to enter into possession of the property bequeathed him by his grandfather for the next four years, his friends thought it wise in him not to relinquish his profession at that time ; and he succeeded without difficulty in getting a berth in a ship that was going to China,

where there was a prospect of a war breaking out. When the brief contest was over, his friends heard that he had got his promotion and left his ship; but the next letter, instead of announcing his return to Kingsmills, informed them that he had gone abroad again with a friend, in company with whom he designed to make a tour of discovery in a very little known part of Africa. After that, nothing more had been heard of him till he appeared suddenly in Miss Earle's parlour, on the night of Caroline's first party.

He came back, as he told himself, a grown-up man; with pursuits and interests of his own; a name which he had already dignified with one or two worthy actions; a work cut out for himself in the world; with that old longing for home and sympathy, that old intense desire to be of consequence to some one, overlaid with more weighty interests and projects that stood him instead of intimate ties. So he told himself, very emphatically, as he

walked along the Kingsmills streets towards the house where he was to meet his uncle and cousin. The first tones of a low eager voice, the touch of a trembling hand, one glance of an appealing face turned up to his, told him something quite different, though for the time, he shut his heart very resolutely against the contradiction.

CHAPTER V.

"Toiling, rejoicing, sorrowing,
Onward through life he goes,
Each morning sees some task begin,
Each evening sees it close,
Something attempted, something done,
Has earned a night's repose."

LONGFELLOW.

"LATE again, Harry," said Mr. Meyer to the last comer of a troop of noisy boys, who, whispering, talking, and laughing, had, by twos and threes, assembled in the parlour at the Leasows, which looked into the yard.

It was half-past seven on a cold, cloudy March morning, when the aspect of the world without, especially of that part of the world commanded by Mr. Meyer's parlour-window, the sloppy manufacturing yard, and the misty

river, was not particularly conducive to early rising. It was, however, a high crime and misdemeanour to be half a minute late for morning prayers ; and Mr. Meyer's tone had just that degree of surprise and reproof in it which, coming from him, was generally felt by every member of his household to be sufficient punishment for minor offences.

Harry was going to slide to his seat with a shade less happy self-complacency than usual on his round rosy face, when the excuse-maker-general to the family, the elder brother, Max, interposed with a word in his favour.

"Harry is hardly late," he said, holding up a small gold watch before Mr. Meyer's eyes ; "you are a minute too fast, sir."

"Well, well, Max, Harry shall have the advantage of the minute ; but I must say it is an odd thing that your watch never seems to allow that any one is either too late or too early ; I wonder by what mesmerism you manage it."

"I have been across the yard to bring in the letter-bag," Harry now took courage to put in, deliberately producing the said bag, which he had been holding with both hands behind him, and looking deprecatingly in his father's face.

To bring in the letter-bag before prayers was another offence against family morality; but Mr. Meyer knew the temptation which had induced Harry to commit it, and was merciful.

"You, both of you, remember that it is time for prayers, I suppose," he could not, however, help remarking, as Maxwell snatched the bag from Harry's hand, and began to search for the key along the chimney-piece with somewhat trembling fingers.

The remark was possibly unheard; Max tore open the bag, and threw the letters one by one on the table.

"Here it is at last," he said, clutching tight hold of one that lay at the very bottom of the bag.

"Open it, and read it, then, my boy," said Mr. Meyer, withdrawing his finger from the bell-pull.

"Be quick, Max," said Harry, breathlessly.

But a change had come over Maxwell's face at the touch of the paper between his fingers. The eager boyish look passed away; a clear light shone in the eyes that were flashing impatiently a minute ago, and his hand became quite still. He put the letter down upon the table unopened.

"It will keep till after prayers," he said, "I had rather you rang now, father, thank you."

He walked quickly to his place when he had spoken, and occupied himself, till the reading began, with finding the proper psalms for the day for two little boys of six and seven; who, since one chair in the room had been left vacant, had considered it a sort of right to occupy each a place by their eldest brother's side. He was not the first to approach the table, when

the morning-service was concluded. Harry seized on the letter before he could get near, and forced it into his hand.

"Now, Max, now," he said, with anxious eyes fixed on his brother's face.

"Yes, now," said Mr. Meyer, "you are ready for whatever it is."

Maxwell walked to the window with his letter, and opened it carefully; and, considering what a very expressive face his was, it showed considerable self-command, that while he was reading no change of countenance betrayed whether the news it contained were good or bad. When he had finished, and his eyes met all the anxious looks that were directed to him, a brilliant smile flashed into his face.

"It is all right," he said, "my picture is to be exhibited, and it has been hung in a good place; yes, it is all right."

An eager clapping of hands, and shouting from the boys, showed their sympathy. Mr. Meyer's congratulations were almost as

loud and hearty. Harry, who was standing nearest his brother, was the only silent one; he had caught hold of Maxwell's hand in the moment of suspense, and now held it so tightly and nervously that Max stooped down and whispered, "there, be quiet, Harry," in a tone that somehow conveyed a great deal more than the words.

"Now, then, boys, take your places, and let us have breakfast," said Mr. Meyer, "for we are late, in spite of Max's watch; I am going to bring Eva down."

"No, I will run and fetch her!" cried Max, evidently glad to escape from the room with the excitement he was half-ashamed of betraying too openly. A race up three flights of stairs to the very top of the house did not satisfy his inclination for rapid motion; he threw open the door of a large unfurnished room at the head of the last flight, and began rapidly pacing up and down, talking out loud, and gesticulating as he walked. "Has

it come?" he said; "has it come? is this the first taste of it? *Success!* am I really beginning the great struggle? the first step securely taken; the glorious, glorious strife fairly open before me; and then—"

He stopped short, raising his arms, and looking up as if some beautiful phantom beckoned to him from out of the distance.

"Brother Max," said a small lisping voice behind him, with a queer sound of offended dignity in it; "I am waiting for you to take me down stairs."

Maxwell turned sharply round, the enthusiasm died out of his face in an instant, its usual good-humoured, sensible, everyday look coming back again, and he laughed out quite loud at himself.

"You here, youngest princess," he said to a sleepy-eyed, auburn-haired, two-years-old maiden, who had marched after him with uncertain steps to the middle of the room;

"and pray, what business has your royal highness to follow me about?"

"You kept me waiting," said the child again, dropping each word slowly from her rosy pouting lips.

"Come then, Madam Dignity, you shall not wait any longer," her brother said, good humouredly mounting her on his shoulder as he spoke, and running down stairs with his burden as quickly as he had come up.

The boys down stairs had meanwhile placed a high chair at the table next to their father's seat, and to this throne Eva was conducted on her entrance with a great display of homage. Father and brothers vieing with each other, in efforts to obtain a word or a look, while the dainty little lady dispensed her favours with true royal caprice.

Maxwell sat at the head of the table now during breakfast hour, and it must be confessed the comfort of the morning and evening meals was not what it had been in past times ;

the tea and coffee, prospered or not in his hands, according to the more or less absorbing interest of the book or anatomical drawing that was usually propped against the urn. Harry sat next him, and dispensed milk and bread to the younger boys, in a blundering, left-handed, absent sort of way; stealing furtive glances at Max's book at intervals, and at intervals studying a torn Latin grammar on his knee.

Mr. Meyer had taken to reading his letters at breakfast since—since that morning, when they had all laughed and talked so gaily, for the last time, just before Eva was born. He looked grave, and his face had become a little worn since then; and from respect to him the whole party were now usually somewhat silent at meals, and other family gatherings. This morning, however, Maxwell's face showed that he was occupied with very pleasant thoughts; and Harry, making more blunders in his duties than usual, sat looking at him, his round placid face, a sort of subdued reflection

of the sunshine in his brother's. Eva, true to the reputation of her sex, sustained the chief weight of the conversation, lisping out at intervals solemn little sentences, such as—"I am drinking my tea now. I am holding a spoon in my hand. I am eating my breakfast," which were always received with rapturous applause and gratitude by her brothers, and which constantly induced even Mr. Meyer to put down his letters and stroke her golden hair with a loving hand.

The early meal did not occupy much time. Mr. Meyer soon gathered up his letters, already carefully folded, and called Max to follow him to a little room, opening on to the breakfast-room, which was usually called his study. They had a conference there every morning. Mr. Meyer, in his clear, concise way, giving rapid instructions on matters of business, either concerning the household, or the manufactory, which he chose to entrust to his son; and Maxwell listening, with a business-like look on his

handsome face, that gave quite a new character to it. These talks had begun long ago, when Max was quite a child, and had been proud of having little commissions intrusted to him by his father. During the last two years they had rather changed their character.

Mr. Meyer had fallen into a habit of asking Maxwell's opinion on any doubtful point of conduct or interest, and the answers he got often displayed a clear insight and vigorous judgment that took him by surprise, and disposed him, as cares and anxieties pressed heavily upon him, to rely more and more on this unlooked-for home-help, day by day.

On the morning we have been describing, the talk between them was longer than usual, and Mr. Meyer's face wore a somewhat troubled expression as he left the inner room. When he had nearly reached the door of the breakfast-room, he came back with a sudden look of recollection :—

“By the way, Max,” he said, “there is

one more question I want to ask you. Do you happen to know where young Brandon has been these two last days? for he has never been near the office."

"I—no, how should I know?" said Max, evidently a little taken aback at the question; "unless, indeed—"

"Well, out with it, if it is not a secret," said Mr. Meyer.

"Yesterday and to-day were the days of the races at Bilton; that's all I know."

"Humph, Max, I have had a letter about that lad; a letter warning me not to trust too much to his honesty; it comes from one of our clerks, who has been removed to the bank at Bilton. I would not mention it to anyone else, but I should like you to read it through, and tell me what you think of it; there is nothing like proof you see, only vague suspicion."

Max hardly glanced through the letter his father placed in his hand.

"It is not true, it cannot be true, you must not think anything more about it," he exclaimed, hastily.

"I am glad you speak so strongly," said Mr. Meyer, looking relieved. "I have a great deal of confidence in your knowledge of character; you have seen more of the lad than I have, and if you think him perfectly trustworthy, I will not allow the warning to have weight. You see, Mr. Gadstone has taken a great fancy to young Brandon, who is certainly sharp enough, and he talks of removing him from my office, and promoting him to a more important situation in the bank; this has got abroad, and created jealousy perhaps."

Max felt rather disturbed at having his decision accepted so readily; he was conscious that when he spoke, he had not been thinking of Fred Brandon, or of any impression of his character. It was a vision of a very different face from his, with honest brave eyes, that had been called up suddenly before him by the

sound of the name, and had prompted his indignant words.

To have recalled them now would have created too strong an impression the other way, and Maxwell thought there could be no harm in letting them pass with one little qualifying observation.

"I do not see so very much of Frederick Brandon, you know," he said.

"No," exclaimed his father, rather reproachfully, "and I wonder why you don't; he's your cousin, and you might do something to keep him out of harm's way. When I was your age Max, I should not have been satisfied that a cousin of mine should have gone wrong for want of a friend."

Max laughed out loud.

"No, sir; I know exactly how you managed your cousins and everyone then, as you do us and the workpeople now; but I have not your mysterious power of governing. I am not a king by divine right as you are. It is

a thing by itself, and I have not got it. You expect me to influence Fred Brandon! we are as far from each other as the Equator from the Pole."

"Ah! there it is," said Mr. Meyer, gravely, "that feeling of difference. I complimented you just now on your knowledge of character, but I am afraid you plume yourself on it too much. You think so much of the difference, that you forget the common ground—you won't have influence unless you stand firmly on that. The power of influencing people, means the power of sympathising thoroughly with them. I thought you had that."

"Yes, with my kind, but not otherwise. Brandon and I have nothing to do with each other; he despises me for an unpractical dreamer; I could not move him an inch out of his way; I'll try however, all the same, to satisfy your conscience, father, though I don't think any good will come of my meddling in his affairs."

“Well! he is your cousin, and you persuaded me to employ him. I should feel that a sort of responsibility, if I were you; do as you think best, however. There is the bell, we must leave off talking now, and begin to work.”

A large bell, from the top of a high roof near, now swung out the hour. Groups of smock-frocks men began to assemble in the yard; the doors of the great building opposite were thrown open, the busy wheels began their monotonous tune, the short hour of morning-freshness was over, they had entered on the burden and heat of the day.

At about this hour the party in Stone Street were also gathering round their breakfast-table; and, thanks to the novelty of Sebastian's presence, their morning meal was much pleasanter, and more sociable than usual.

Mrs. Brandon did not appear as much

fatigued with her night's watching as Ruth had feared she would be.

Caroline and Frederick contrived to keep up a brisk conversation with Sebastian; and Miss Earle divided her attention so entirely between Sebastian and her task of preparing the breakfast, that even her sister's anxious eyes could not read anything in her face that recalled the uncomfortable scene of the previous evening. Only one little drop of gall oozed out, in the course of the morning, to prevent the weary heart of the invalid from hoping too much from this appearance of calm. It was Sebastian who, with his usual ill luck, brought up the subject of contention. When breakfast was over, he proffered a request that Ruth might be allowed to accompany him on a visit he proposed to make that day to Earle's Court, and he looked towards Miss Earle as he spoke. Ruth saw the cloud that immediately gathered on her aunt's brow, and would willingly have

sacrificed all the future holidays in store for her, to have been able to stop the impending answer.

"My dear Sebastian," Miss Earle said, with a look of feigned surprise; "you will learn by-and-bye not to consult me about any of Ruth's proceedings. She may come and go as she likes; she is quite independent of me. If her mother thinks she deserves any indulgence to-day, she will let her go."

Poor Mrs. Brandon looked aghast; of all minor troubles, the being placed in a position, in which she was compelled to choose between disappointing her favourite daughter and annoying her sister, was one of the worst to her.

If looks could have killed, Miss Earle's life would not have been safe from Ruth's eyes.

"I shall stay at home, mamma; I do not want to go," she interposed, before her mother's trembling lips could frame a word.

"Let us put Ruth's deserts out of the

question for once," said Sebastian, this time having the wisdom not to look at anyone; "I have asked for her company as a favour to myself."

This judiciously-framed sentence awoke some hope in Ruth's mind; her chance of seeing Earle's Court and Alice looked so possible, that she began to be agitated about it. She had to bear suspense for a moment or two, while Mrs. Brandon looked wistfully at her sister, and Miss Earle, with an unconcerned face, went on with her occupation of arranging the tea-cups on the tray. At last the verdict came.

"I should think, sister," she said, looking up, "that Ruth can have nothing better to do than to attend to her cousin."

"Oh! no, indeed, and I am very glad to have her go," said poor Mrs. Brandon, so tremulous with joy and relief, that Ruth was obliged to make a little imperative sign of silence to her, and then ran up stairs hastily

to prepare for her walk ; the edge of her joy just taken off by fear, lest her mother should bring some hard saying on herself, by showing too warm a sympathy with it. As they were leaving the house together, Sebastion lost the credit for tact with which Ruth was half-inclined to invest him, by bringing out a sentence so audacious, that it almost took away her breath to hear it.

“ I am going to call at the Leasows on my way, to see my brother,” he observed, “ Ruth can rest there, while I talk to him.”

No answer of any kind came from anyone to this remark ; and Ruth did not see what effect it produced, for she had not courage to raise her eyes till she was fairly out of the house, and had walked half-way down the street with her cousin.

Their walk promised at first to be a silent one. Sebastion spoke first, but not till they were nearly out of the town.

“ Ruth,” he began, abruptly, “ you said, last

night, that I should never be able to make my brother look down upon Mr. Meyer; I did not understand at the time, why you made such a remark; I had not said, and I never do say, anything disparaging of Mr. Meyer. I have a certain respect for him, though I don't wish my brother to spend all his life in his society. There is no doubt that he is a very worthy person, a most respectable tradesman, all that a person in his rank of life can be expected to be; but his rank is not mine, nor my brother's."

"Do you mean to talk to Max like that, cousin?" cried Ruth, "do you mean to tell him that you have a certain respect for Mr. Meyer, and that he is a respectable tradesman?"

"Why not?" answered Sebastian, meeting his cousin's indignant look with a very cool one; "it is perfectly true, Mr. Meyer is a respectable tradesman, and too sensible a man besides, to object to be called so."

"It is not that, it is not that," cried Ruth; "but now, Sebastion, I will tell you something; you and I ought to be friends, for we have a misfortune in common; we neither of us know how to say things in the right way to the right people. I am always in trouble on that account, and I see plainly that you will be; you will make mischief between people, like Aunt Harriet and poor mamma, so pray keep out of their way as much as you can, and with people like Alice and Max—"

"Alice and Max! well, go on," interrupted Sebastion, who could not help giving a start at the two names, they sounded so strangely together; "you are going to tell me what harm *I* shall do to people, like Alice and Max."

"No, I think I shan't," said Ruth, who had felt the start, though she did not by any means understand its cause; "you will find out soon enough, and perhaps I am saying a wrong thing now."

“One more question, however, you must answer,” Sebastian said, when they had again walked on some time in silence; “how is it that you know so much about my brother, since none of you but Fred are allowed to go to the Leasows?”

“I have seen him several times at Earle’s Court,” Ruth answered; “and Alice tells me all about him. She knows him very well; she says he is wonderfully clever, and you know he is just as much her cousin as you are.”

Certainly Ruth did not over-estimate her aptitude for making unwelcome speeches. Sebastian took care, by keeping silence till the end of their walk, not to bring any more of them upon himself.

CHAPTER VI.

“Already in thy spirit this divine,
Whatever weal or woe betide,
Be that high sense of duty still thy guide,
And all good powers shall aid a soul like thine.”

SOUTHEY.

MR. MEYER'S door was opened to the cousins by a very busy-looking maid-servant, who roused Sebastian's ire at the very first moment of his crossing the threshold, by the bewildered look with which she received his question:—

“Is Mr. Earle at home?”

“Who may you be asking after?” she said.

“Mr. Earle!” said Sebastian, sharply.

“Mr. Maxwell,” put in Ruth, in a tone of explanation.

"Oh! Mr. Maxwell. I'll see sir; please to walk in."

She left them standing in the hall while she went towards the staircase to speak to a little boy who was slowly coming down, and Sebastian turned to Ruth:—

"Is it by Maxwell's own desire that no one here calls him by his proper name?" he said, in a tone of displeasure.

"It is not done on purpose, exactly," Ruth answered; "but it is really very natural. He has always lived with Mr. Meyer, and the Earle's scarcely own him: it is natural I think, that people should forget that he is not Mr. Meyer's own son. That is little Willie Meyer; the servant is asking him to call his brother; shall we go to him?"

The child was communicative, and readily gave the information required of him.

"Max is up stairs," he said, in answer to Sebastian's question. "You may come, if you like; it is not lesson-time yet."

"Show us the way to him then," said Sebastian, smiling.

The boy led the way up stairs, and as Sebastian followed, with Ruth, he had time to disentangle his recollections of various small Meyers, in various stages of growth; and to decide that this particular one must have been the most important person in the house—the baby—at the time of his last visit there.

"Where are you taking us to?" said Ruth, when they were nearly at the top of the third flight of stairs.

"To the Tower of Babel," was the grave answer; "but please to open the door of it yourself, for I can't reach up."

Sebastian strode forward first, somewhat impatiently, and threw open the door to which the child pointed. It led to the long, unfurnished room where Maxwell had walked up and down in the morning; it had long been known as the boys' room, and as it occupied the whole

length of a projecting part of the roof, it generally went in the family by the additional appropriate name of the Tower of Babel. There was noise enough going on within to drown the sound Sebastian made in opening the door, and he stood looking in unobserved till Ruth and the child joined him; even then he did not immediately move forward, and Ruth's quick eye took in the scene.

One end of the room was fitted up in a rude way as a painter's studio; there was the usual litter of palettes, plaster-casts, lay-figures, and canvas turned to the wall: in the other, and by far the larger half of the room, the litter was of a less quiet and harmless kind. Seven boys, in various attitudes, stood, sat, or sprawled on the floor; three were playing at leap-frog, two at marbles, a sixth was hammering nails into a piece of wood, the seventh, with a book before him, and his eyes shut, was chanting very loud some Latin words to a psalm tune; a little girl of two sat on the only chair

in the room, solemnly **surveying** the sports, **and nursing a large black cat** upon her knee. A large easel formed the dividing line between the two territories, and, standing at it, utterly absorbed from everything that was passing round, Maxwell composedly went on with his own occupation. It happened to be the strange one of taking a careful sketch of a skeleton, which, propped up with a black cloth behind it, against the furthest wall, grimly overlooked the busy groups, forming a comment on the scene which no one had leisure to read.

The boys saw the stranger first : the sudden cessation of their noise made Maxwell look round, and at sight of his brother, come forward with an exclamation of eager delight. Ruth, who was already an observer of character, noticed with interest the difference between the two brothers' manner to each other at their meeting. She saw that Maxwell, forgetting the years that had passed, was prepared to greet his brother with the frank, boyish

caress that had been customary between them in the times when their brief meetings had had all the charms of mystery about them; and when he had come from a chance interview with his brother in the roads or fields, to pour out every word that he had said, into his mother's eager ears. Sebastian's face expressed even more emotion, but he drew back just enough to check his brother's impulse; he could not forget, even at that moment, the fourteen curious eyes that were watching every movement.

When the first interchange of rapid questions and answers was over, Maxwell perceived Ruth, and looked about rather confusedly for some way of doing the honours of his room. Ruth characteristically made up her mind where she would sit, and what she would do, while he hesitated.

"You and my cousin Sebastian want to talk to each other," she said, "and I do not wish to be in the way; I can amuse myself

very well by looking at all these pictures that are standing against the wall; when I am tired I can sit on this box by the window."

Max, before he left her, dusted the box with a piece of drapery (it wanted it), and drew out a large portfolio of sketches for her to turn over, and then he went back to his brother, who had walked to the chimney-piece in the meantime, and was looking intently at a chalk-drawing, a likeness of Mrs. Meyer, that hung above it.

Ruth saw Max put his hand on Sebastian's shoulder, and though she kept at a little distance, and turned her head away, she knew by the hushed, reverent tones that met her ear that they were talking of their mother.

The boys went back to their own part of the room, and continued their occupations very quietly. Ruth watched them and saw that they neither stared at their newly-arrived

half-brother, nor showed indifference to his presence by making any rude noise. She had been accustomed to hear the little Meyers called vulgar children, she wondered whether her own brothers would have shown as much innate politeness.

By the time that Ruth had peeped behind each of the canvases and settled herself on the box to inspect the contents of the portfolio, the subject of conversation between the brothers appeared to have changed. Max had walked back to his easel; Sebastian had turned up another old box for a seat, and they were talking so loudly and easily, that she thought she might gratify her curiosity by dividing her attention between the drawings and the conversation.

The subject of it soon fixed her attention so entirely that she put all question of her right to hear out of her head.

Sebastian, she found, was trying to persuade his brother to spend the next few years

in travelling with him in Italy ; promising him as an inducement, that he should have every opportunity of studying his art to the best advantage, and frankly urging his brotherly right to supply him with the means of doing so. It was nothing to Ruth whether the offer were accepted or not ; but she had a preconceived notion of what Maxwell's conduct ought to be, and would be, under such circumstances, and it is provoking to enthusiastic people to have their ideal of a character lowered. Sebastian, as he went on, drawing out his plan with more precise and attractive details, looked to her no better than a tempting serpent, and she could hardly restrain herself from putting in some warning word, when she glanced at her younger cousin's face and saw by his troubled eye and flushed cheek, how every sentence weighed with him.

She was amused with herself afterwards for feeling so intensely anxious for the answer. Her mind was set at rest about it before any words

came ; the gradual steadying of the eyes, the resolute compression of the mouth in the face she was watching, told her first what resolution had been taken.

“Thank you,” Maxwell said at last, with a sort of concentrated quietness in his tone, “but it would not do. I shall always feel grateful to you Sebastion for what you have wished, but it would not do.”

“Why not?” said Sebastion, resolutely ; “Max, I came to England on purpose to talk over this plan with you ; I am your elder brother, I cannot allow your prospects and position in life to be sacrificed without an effort.”

“You are my elder brother, and you have a right to know my reasons for refusing your kindness, ‘certainly,’ said Max ; and as he spoke, the disappointment, that had for a moment clouded his face, passed away, and his bright look shone out brighter than ever. “I should like to go to Italy with you of course.

Why, to go to Italy, and with you, is the one thing I have always been dreaming about: but—it won't do, I can't leave home just now; you see I am wanted, they could none of them get on without me here."

"They!" cried Sebastian, with a sharpness of tone which came from a jealous pain, no one there knew him well enough to divine *they*, "this is absurd, Max; of what great use can you be to anyone here, and besides, if you were, why should you sacrifice your own interests to these Meyers."

"My father, and my brothers and sisters," interposed Max, quickly.

"Not more yours than mine."

"Certainly not *less* yours than mine."

"Well, let that pass, let them be ever so much to you; but what can you do for them important enough to make it worth while to sacrifice your own interest to it. I remember quite well how your time used to be wasted; you do nothing I imagine which an office-clerk,

or a tutor, or a nursemaid, would not do much better."

Maxwell's cheek and brow burned as he heard his occupations classed, and his worth thus estimated by his brother; but he made no immediate answer. There were other eyes watching, and other ears intent on the conversation besides Ruth's. Harry Meyer, during the discussion between the brothers, had been gradually dragging himself along the floor, nearer and nearer the black line that cut off Maxwell's studio from the boys' play-room; he was now sitting, with his book still open on his knees, within an inch of the easel, his deep, dreamy, brown eyes fixed on his brother's face, with an agony of entreaty that made itself felt with a sort of mesmeric power by the speakers.

They both turned round instinctively to look at him, and Max laughed when he caught sight of his entranced face and odd attitude.

"Harry, you foolish fellow," he said, "I don't believe that you have looked at your book once for the last half hour. Come, get up! If you want to say your lesson once more over to me, you will just have time. In five minutes I shall send you all off to school."

Harry's attempt to repeat his lesson was a signal failure: his thoughts had been far enough away from Latin grammar, and, once gone, they were not easily recalled. Max tried him again and again with persevering kindness, and returned the book at last with a shrug of despair.

The familiar words, and the blundering, absent way of repeating them, recalled other precisely similar scenes to Sebastian's mind.

"I begin to think," he said, suddenly, "that time has stood still in this house while I have been away. I believe that Harry Meyer was repeating that identical Latin rule, and that you, Max, were drawing a skeleton

the last time I spent a morning here, four years ago."

"And you have been half over the world, and helped to conquer an empire since," said Maxwell; "but oh, hare! don't look down on tortoises with too sovereign a contempt. Your eyes are not minute enough to see the progress we are making; but it is made, nevertheless. There are differences between skeletons and skeletons; and Harry is halting at this obstinate word-barrier in his third progress through the conquered country. Your turn and mine will come at last, Harry; never fear. But now be off. I am sorry for you—you don't know your lesson, and you will come to grief; but you must get the others ready and go now."

Harry took the book with a perfectly tranquil face, and began vaguely searching out other books and bags from a confused heap near the door, and handed them to a group of still younger boys who now gathered round him. Sebastian

watched him curiously as he helped two small children to put on their hats and shoes with much the same patient kindness of manner with which Max had been helping him.

"Why don't you make him learn his *own* lesson properly," he asked, at last, turning to Max, "and desire some one else to attend to those other children?"

Maxwell's and Ruth's eyes happened to meet at this question, and somehow or other they both smiled.

"We have an odd sort of a notion here," said Max, "that attending to other people is generally the best part of one's own lesson."

Sebastion saw the smile and partly understood it.

"Come, come," he said, rather impatiently, "don't talk generalities to me—I am a plain man—let us come to the point. Do you mean to say soberly, and in earnest, that you think you shall learn *your lesson* better, become a better artist, if you go

on living here among all this hubbub, wasting half your time in hearing Latin lessons, and doing office - work, than you would if you went with me to Italy, and had every possible advantage for studying your art properly."

"Staying here and doing my duty,— yes, I do believe that will make me a better painter than anything else will," said Maxwell, firmly.

Sebastion went on as if he had not heard this answer. "Remember, I don't want you to be a painter. I had rather you had chosen any other profession, and I am ready to help you forward in any you may choose; but whatever you are, be the best of your kind. I have always understood that an artist cannot be worth anything unless he has devoted a certain time to studying the works of the great masters in Italy."

"Well, I mean to study them; they will wait for me," said Max, "and in the mean

time, I am studying what they studied—the works of The Great Master. Italy or no, I mean to be an artist, and worth something too, depend upon that.”

“You have quite made up your mind, then,” said Sebastion, a little annoyed at the independence of his brother’s tone.—“You will go your own way—you refuse my help.”

“But not unkindly,” Max said, “don’t make a quarrel of it, Sebastion.”

“No, certainly not,” Sebastion answered, but he would not see nor take Maxwell’s half-outstretched hand; he could not bring himself to make the tone of his answer quite cordial. He had been dwelling on this plan for several months, and the failure of it was a deep disappointment to him. What was the use of all this money, into possession of which he was about to enter, if it could not help him to draw his brother one least bit nearer to him. He had reckoned securely on its

doing that. He felt discouraged at the outset, and he had more difficult and dearer schemes than even this, to carry out. The reasons Maxwell had given for refusing to leave home brought painfully before him the difference between his brother's position and his own, and increased his irritation. It had always been so; he never had been able to enter that house without being bruised against an invisible wall, which encircled all the other inmates so closely round and left him out.

Perhaps Maxwell felt a little of the Meyer and Earle antagonism as he hastily drew back his hand, repulsed in his affectionate impulse a second time. In the momentary silence that followed, he too took a mental measure of the difference between their situations in life; himself Mr. Meyer's factotum, alternately clerk, tutor, nursemaid, and struggling artist; and his brother Captain Earle, the distinguished officer, the enterprising traveller, the heir to Earle's Court. A

little touch of defiant pride had come into his manner when he spoke next, and though he resumed the conversation almost immediately, he turned it on common acquaintances and topics of general interest.

Ruth soon left off listening, and turned to the portfolio for amusement.

It was filled, as full as it could hold, with sketches of every variety of shape, size and subject, and done in almost every kind of medium. They were mostly very literal studies from nature, and, as they had all been taken within a circle of a few miles round, Ruth recognised the views again and again. Those three stunted oak trees, standing in a flat field, with a broken gate in the foreground—she had passed the place twenty times; but she had never seen so much in the reality as this translation of the scene into black and white lines told her. She put the sketch down reluctantly and took up another. It was the same everywhere, nothing met her

eyes but common well-known objects ; little bits of light and shade ; the old broken wall of the dock-yard at Kingsmills, with vacant-faced sailors leaning over it and looking up at the sky, glimpses of light from furnace-fires, on dark, coarse faces, all familiar and all literally rendered, and yet each with a comment on it. The most splendid new scenes would not have given Ruth so much pleasure as these did, which gave her a hint, answering to a longing in her heart, of the possibility of gaining a power of seeing old things with ever new vision.

She came to the end of the sketches at length, and drew out one or two more finished drawings. In these, the artist had not been content with drawing what he had seen ; he had amused himself by translating into his own language pictures which greater artists had already painted in words. Ruth was pleased to recognise one or two scenes from books she knew. There was Bertha Von

Lichtenried, sitting in the window of the old castle, reading in a saintly book. Bertha wore Alice's face, of course, but with something—Ruth was obliged to confess it to herself—something of resolution and holy calm to which Alice's face was as yet a stranger. Next came a vivid realisation of a verse from the Ancient Mariner.

“Like one that on a lonesome road,
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round, walks on,
And turns no more his head :
Because he knows a frightful fiend,
Does close behind him tread.”

The mingling of fancy and reality in this sketch was very striking. Ruth knew the road perfectly ; it was the lane leading from Earle's court to the Kingsmills Road, she knew the very spot ; the dark hedge, stunted tree, and raised causeway, the very stones were all faithfully copied ; and, crushing them down with rapid steps, came the solitary figure, spectre-dogged.

The last picture she took up pleased her most of all, and here again she noticed the mixture of careful literalness with wild fancy. Two lines of a well-known nursery-rhyme were written at the top of the page :

“One to watch, one to pray,
Two to bear the soul away.”

Below was a sketch of Eva Meyer, asleep on the studio floor; the bare floor, the child's tumbled dress, the robust vigour and health expressed in the child's figure and face were all as little ideal as possible; but, hovering over this every-day figure, leant two wonderful forms. One, with down-cast eyes, out-stretched arms, and drooping wings, expressed all the yearning agony of sympathetic love. This was the watching angel, before whose prophetic eyes all the coming sorrows of the child's life lay revealed. The praying angel guarded the head of the figure; his face was triumphant and calm, the eyes seemed to

pierce to an infinite distance, the hands were clasped on the breast in an attitude of patient waiting; between them rested a crown of stars, from which a faint white light shone round the head of the child, forming the one ideal touch that connected the upper with the lower half of the picture. Ruth held this sketch long in her hand. The sympathetic face of the watcher touched her most; that she could understand, the lesson of the hopeful one lay beyond her—too far off yet for her to read. She had not done with it when the sound of her cousin Maxwell's voice behind her recalled her thoughts to the present.

“You have been very patient for a long time,” he said, coming up to her and speaking in the approving tone in which he would have addressed a child.

Ruth, though only two years younger than her sister Caroline, was accustomed to being treated like a child, and, in general, she did

not mind it; but just now unusual thoughts were stirring in her mind, she must give some vent to them, and for once in her life assert her right to be understood.

"Cousin Max," she said, without embarrassing herself with preface or explanation, and putting aside his remark with supreme indifference, "I am glad you have refused to leave home; I understand what you feel about it. It would be cowardly to run away from one's difficulties; it would not do any good either. One must stay and conquer them, if one means to be worth anything. I am glad you are going to stay; I should not have liked you, if you had gone."

The expression in the earnest dark eyes, the emotion of the low, but vehement voice, took Maxwell by surprise.

"I am glad you think I did right," he said, simply.

There was no time for more. Sebastian came up to tell Ruth that they must now

bring their long visit to a close, and they took a hasty leave ; but from that time forth, for some inscrutable reason, the question of Ruth's approval or disapproval became a consideration that influenced more or less all her young cousin's doings.

CHAPTER VII.

"Oh, sweet pale Margaret!
Oh, rare pale Margaret!
What lit your eyes with tearful power?
Who lent you love, your mortal dower?
Of pensive thought, and aspect pale,
Your melancholy, sweet and frail,
As perfume of the cuckoo-flower."

TENNYSON.

ALICE awoke the morning after Mrs. Warren's party, with a feeling of contentment and freedom from anxiety, to which she had been a stranger for more than two years. For months and months she had been living with an undefined apprehension hanging over her. She had long known, everybody knew, that Major Earle's affairs were in a very embarrassed state; but this knowledge did not much

trouble Alice ; she had heard her father talk of poverty all her life, and it had never come any nearer. She was used to second him in all his endless make-shifts for keeping up appearances at the least possible expense ; and she had got accustomed to the treble gloom that always came on her father's face when she was forced to ask him for money to pay the servants' wages, or defray the necessary expences of the house-keeping. These were to her the necessary evils of life ; she was able to meet them, she knew their faces well, they did not frighten her ; but lately a new fear had sprung up, so dreadful and chilling that she dare not look it in the face, but left it undefined to come and go. It had arisen first from constant watching of her father's face, from studying his changeful moods, his deep fits of gloom and sudden excitement ; and comparing them with what she remembered of him only two years ago. It was impossible to help confessing to herself now and then that there was

a change, Alice dare not ask herself what. She fancied sometimes that she was doing wrong in even thinking about it. Her father's life was outwardly the same as ever: he attended to his affairs as usual, and was fuller than ever of plans and schemes for repairing his fortunes. If Alice suspected that these schemes grew yearly more and more wild, and were less consistently carried out; and if she trembled at times lest a mind, never strong, should give way at last under such constant excitement, she told herself too, that it was hardly a daughter's part to criticise her father's acts more strictly than others did.

She tried to submit herself to her father's sudden changes of conduct, his fits of reckless extravagance and sudden parsimony, without question or remark; but though she submitted, the foreboding grew.

The shadow of coming evil hung over her, creeping nearer and nearer, and swallowing up more and more of the outward world day by

day. It had fallen at last over her own inner world of bright fancies, where she had long been used to retire from outward cares; the golden gate of dream-land was shut against her; fear, in a vague shape, keeping back the key.

When she awoke this morning, however, she felt as if she had suddenly come out of the misty region, where she had been dwelling so long, into fresh air and clear sunshine. It was the firm confidence-giving clasp of Sebastian's hand that, by one magic touch had brought her out.

"Somebody I can trust," those were the words that made Alice's heart dance when they rose spontaneously to her lips at her waking. They accompanied her, an under-current of heart-song, through the morning duties, and when the breakfast-bell rang she went singing down the great stairs, with a bounding step, such as the old oak boards had not felt for many a year.

Her father met her at the door of the morning-room.

“ Alice, how bright and fresh you look this morning; you have a colour, you are in your best looks, that is right, that is just what it should be.” He stooped to kiss her, and Alice, throwing her arms round his neck, ventured on what, between her and Major Earle, was quite a warm morning greeting. Her father’s praises of her looks did not always please her; but to-day she resolved to take them as a proof of love, and nothing else. Alice soon saw that her father’s spirits were as much lightened that morning as her own. He was more himself than she had seen him for several months; it was not a particularly agreeable self, but Alice was very glad to see it again.

If her father had been lively, or even very good humoured, the strangeness of the event might have startled her into fresh anxiety; but as he only showed the restored tone of his

mind by a return to his characteristic habit of minute, pompous fault-finding ; Alice was content to draw the consolatory conclusion that she must have exaggerated the pressure of anxiety that was weighing on his mind.

Major Earle had been up unusually early this morning, and had made an unexpected tour of inspection round the house and garden. It had supplied him with instances enough of the servants' extravagance and neglect of orders to furnish conversation for the whole of breakfast-time. Alice listened, and acquiesced, and said little soothing things, smiling to herself at the recollection of times, ignorant of evil, when such a talk as this would have cost her a morning's tears and a week's headache ; now, how much better she found it, to be scolded about the dust on the drawing-room curtains, or the dents in the silver salvers, than to have to sit in silence opposite her father, and watch that indescribable shadow on his face, and feel so helpless before it.

"I will go to Kingsmills this morning, dear papa," she said, cheerfully, "and get the things you have mentioned, and by to-morrow the rooms shall look more as they ought to do."

Alice had not forgotten Sebastion's and Ruth's promised visit; but she was accustomed to think her own pleasures and engagements of very little moment compared to any wish of her father's. Major Earle rose from his seat as she spoke, and walked towards the head of the table.

"Alice," he said, standing opposite to her, "you remember that your cousin Sebastion has come home."

"Yes, papa," said Alice, looking up, surprised.

"Then listen to me, my dear, for I am going to give you a hint for the regulation of your future conduct with respect—"

Alice knew the tone, the words, the look so well; she had been hearing them over

and over again, about one person or another, for the last miserable two years, always with pain and shame, but never with anything like the impatient horror with which they struck upon her now. She rose hastily and put up her hands before her as if to ward off the words.

"Oh, papa, don't go on," she said, "not about him, not about him."

"Alice, you are really too foolish," her father said, angrily; "sit down. I must say what I have got to say. I will have you, for once in your life, be reasonable. Alice, do you believe what I have often told you about, what your position would be if anything should happen to me? do you know that you would not have a farthing, nor a friend in the world? People will tell you, perhaps, that your mother had a fortune, or that I ought to have saved something for you out of the income of this estate. They know nothing about it; your poor mother was a very extravagant woman, and—and—" Major Earle

was working himself up into a state of excitement, as he always did when he answered supposititious accusations of his conduct towards his daughter, which he had a habit of conjuring up.

Alice gently interposed :

“Dear papa,” she said, falteringly, “I don’t expect—no one expects—no one will think of blaming anything you have done.”

“Well, well, there is no use in explaining to you what you have not sufficient knowledge of the world to understand, but there are some things that even a child can understand; you are no better than a child, but you must have seen all the trouble I have taken, all the plans I have laid to have you suitably provided for. Most girls have mothers to look after their interests; I have stood in the place of both father and mother to you, and yet I must say, Alice, you have not met my efforts with any gratitude or pains on your side. You have disappointed me over

and over again ; what do you expect is to happen to you ? Do you think you are likely to be distinguished when you don't take the slightest pains to please ? That you can be silent and sullen in company, and yet carry off the suffrages of people whom all other girls are trying to attract ? You have had two or three very good chances, and I have had to stand by and see you throw them away one by one."

"Papa, you are mistaken," interrupted Alice, humbly, "they would *not* have liked me, the people you are thinking of, when they had known me better, if I had tried ever so hard to please."

"What nonsense, Alice ; or, if it is true, it must be only because you will fancy yourself and make yourself unlike other people. I tell you it will not do for penniless girls to set up for being different from the rest of the world."

At one time, perhaps, Alice would have

remonstrated, "I can only be what I am." Experience had taught her how much better silence is than words, when they mean nothing to the ears they are spoken to. She sat quite still, and Major Earle, after two turns up and down the room, came back, restored to the same state of mind he was in when she interrupted him.

"I was going to tell you something of importance when you foolishly interfered. I was going to say that I hope you will do everything you possibly can to induce your cousin Sebastian to stay in England now that he has come back ; it is of consequence to me, of more consequence than you can understand, that he should not leave the country again just now. For the rest, a girl of any tact would not need prompting ; but you have no tact, one has to give you orders in plain words, like a child, and I desire, Alice, that you behave well to your cousin ; let there be no capricious changes in your conduct towards him, and when

you do talk to him, for heaven's sake talk sense. Don't let me hear you bringing up any of the strange, out-of-the-way opinions that you deal in sometimes; they are enough to make any sensible man afraid of having anything to do with you. Talk in a sensible way about every-day things as other girls do; and let it be seen that all the advantages I have almost ruined myself to give you have not been quite thrown away. I should like you to find out on what sort of terms Sebastian is likely to be with Mr. Meyer and with his brother; if he likes to see his brother often here, you can of course ask him; but you must keep your cousin Maxwell at a proper distance. You seem sometimes to forget how he is situated, and to encourage more intimacy than our relationship absolutely requires. You must be judicious, and now I think I have said all I wished to say. You need not trouble yourself to speak to the housekeeper to-day. I will order the dinner myself; you

are so indifferent about trifles, one can hardly trust you, and I am resolved not to leave any of my part undone."

"Very well, papa," Alice said, "I will do what I can to please you." There was not a shade of anger, or even of annoyance, in her tone; only a deep despondency, which marred just a little its sweetness. When he was on the point of leaving the room, her father turned round and looked full at her.

"The colour has quite gone out of your face, Alice," he said, peevishly, "I can't think how it is that you so seldom have a colour now: it is not at all becoming to you to be so very pale. I believe you never take any exercise. I wish you would take advantage of this fine gleam, and walk briskly up and down the broad walk till your cousin comes."

"Very well, papa," Alice said again.

She arose to obey mechanically, and left the room while her father, holding the door open, looked after her with an expression of

extreme solicitude on his face that spoke of more affection for his daughter than a listener to the foregoing conversation would have given him credit for. When she had mounted the stairs he sighed a very heavy sigh, and walked down the hall towards the offices, to drive the housekeeper and servants into rebellion by such a morning's active worry as they had not experienced for some months.

Fortunately for Alice's colour and spirits, the morning was so cold that she was obliged to take the prescribed exercise with very rapid steps. Indignant thoughts chased each other through her mind as rapidly.

"Must it always be like this?" she said to herself, "must I never have a friend, or even a pleasant acquaintance, without this odious thought coming in to spoil all at the very beginning. Sebastian, too—I did think I might have had my old friendship with him to myself; and now he might just as well have

stayed in Africa, for any good his coming will do me—I shall feel as far off from him—I shall not be able to help it. Oh! if I were a poor person, and could work and be independent.”

Alice’s thoughts were interrupted by the voice of a child crying in distress; and as this was a sound she could never hear unmoved, she checked her walk and her reverie, and looked round. At the bottom of the garden, close to the lodge-gate, she saw a little girl with a basket of weeds before her, crying very bitterly, and she hastened to her to find out what was the matter. It was the gardener’s youngest daughter, who, knowing Alice well, checked her tears at sight of her kind face, and after some coaxing was brought to answer her repeated questions.

“Father has set me to work, and I am cold and tired, and my hands are sore,” Alice made out at last.

“But you are glad to be able to help your father, are you not?” Alice insinuated, sooth-

ingly ; "it must be pleasant to be of so much use, to help your father."

"It is very cold," persisted the child, "and my hands are all over chilblains."

Very sore, and pinched, and blue, the little hands were, and Alice knelt down on the ground, took off her warm gloves, and began to rub them between her own. After all, she remembered, there are two ways of looking at every position, and other troubles besides sentimental ones.

"I will stay and help you to weed," Alice said, forgetting that the walk near the lodge was in deep shade, and that a red nose and pinched cheeks were not exactly what her father would like to see her bring in with her from her walk.

The child did not seem to think the offer of Alice's help a very brilliant one, and Alice was just considering how she could contrive to smuggle her little friend into the house, to warm and feed her, without being detected by

the housekeeper, of whom she stood much in awe, when the gates behind them were thrown open, and she had to jump up quickly from the ground to make way for her cousins, Sebastian and Ruth, who just then entered the avenue.

“Here,” Alice whispered to the child, “put on my warm gloves, they are not much too large for you, I will come to you again by-and-bye.”

Then she stepped forward a little coldly, and with a slight air of embarrassment, to meet her cousins.

Ruth got the first and warmest shake of the ungloved hands, Sebastian only a touch of two cold, white fingers. They walked on to the house together; Sebastian had not much to say, Alice less; so they went on almost in silence. As they mounted the steps of the house, Alice began to wonder whether kneeling down on a damp gravel-walk to rub a poor child's hands might not be one

of the peculiar things against which her father had warned her ; and, afraid of bringing on herself a reproof the very first day, she paused at the entrance and found courage to say something.

“Papa had just told me to walk up and down where the sun was warmest,” she said ; “I had not been very long at the garden-gate.”

Her eyes met Sebastion's as she spoke. It was so like a hundred other things she had said in the same place that he could not help smiling. Ruth thought it a patronising smile, but Alice was re-assured and made happy by it ; yes, it was all right, it was the old, dear, protecting elder brother's look. She would keep her old friend whatever anyone said. She passed with a lighter step into the house, and Sebastion followed behind, thinking that he might have spared himself his four years' wanderings in Africa, for two sentences and two looks had undone all the good he had

gained from them. He had fallen precisely into his old position, as near and as far off.

The aspect of the entrance-hall had changed so much since Sebastian had last entered it that he could not help pausing for a moment to take in the difference. Instead of looking as it used to do, cold, bare, and stately, with its worm-eaten oak chairs against the walls, and deer-antlers above, it was now hung with pictures from end to end, and rather over-crowded with pieces of furniture; some in good keeping with the place, and some quite as much out of character with it.

"The entrance-hall looks smaller than it used to do," Sebastian remarked, glancing round.

"The space is over-filled," Alice said. "All these things are not meant to stay here, but papa has bought them at different times, and some day or other he will decide where to put them."

A table covered with what appeared to be unfinished models of machines met Sebastion's surprised eyes as he moved on. Alice perceived how his sailor-like love of neatness was offended, and stopped before the table to apologise for its untidy appearance.

"You will come to know the contents of this table well," she said, "when you have had one or two talks with papa. These are all models of inventions that he is interested in. I believe he has spent a great deal of money about them. I don't understand mechanics and can't introduce you to them, but I believe this large thing is some new contrivance for pumping water out of the coal mines; and this one next to it is for pumping the water back again into the mines, when there is fire in them. There is always either fire or water in papa's mines; but I think these different inventions amuse him and give him something to think about."

Sebastion looked grave.

"It must be rather an expensive amusement, I should think," he said.

The study door opened behind him while the words were on his lips, and an imploring look from Alice made him recollect that he had been speaking a great deal louder than she had done; and recalled the feeling of restraint and the idea of mystery that had always annoyed his straightforward temper on previous visits to Earle's Court.

Major Earle welcomed his nephew to the house most cordially. He had such an overflowing amount of pleasure and gratification to express, that Ruth, to her surprise, came in for no little share of it; even the circumstance of their having met Alice in the morning walk did not pass without a congratulatory remark or two.

Sebastion had always felt rather more repulsed than gratified by his uncle's elaborate politeness; but it was his manner to everyone, it was nothing new, and he could not see any

reason for Alice to blush and look guilty and pained at every word.

The same strange contradiction of manner between the father and daughter lasted during the whole visit. Ruth found it a very tedious one, and could not feel as gratified as she supposed she ought, when Major Earle invited her to spend the rest of the day at Earle's Court and offered them the use of the carriage in the evening to convey them home. She thought the hours would never go. They wandered about the garden and sat in the library making conversation; Major Earle always keeping near, attentive and complimentary, appealing to his daughter at every other word, and watching, Ruth thought, every sentence that fell from her lips with nervous anxiety, while Sebastian, after each one of his uncle's flattering speeches, froze colder and colder in his sensitive reserve.

The dinner, at length, brought some relief. It amused Ruth, who knew the

usual Earle's Court manners well, to observe how completely this day Alice and her father had changed places. It was usually Major Earle who sat silent behind the silver dish-covers, while Alice, with all sorts of timid attentions and carefully-chosen remarks, employed all her ingenuity to lure her father into talk and to prevent his silence and gloom from being reflected on the guests. To-day Major Earle was the smiling, polite, host; trying every now and then to draw his daughter into proper attention to her duties, while Alice seconded his efforts so ill, that anyone who had heard her answers and had not looked at her face might almost have thought her sullen. Sebastian, it must be confessed, did not contribute as much to the amusement of the party as he might have done. Major Earle, after making one or two vain attempts to draw him into talk about his travels, was thrown back on his usual topic of conversation, when he did condescend to talk. He

amused himself and his auditors by giving somewhat minute accounts of various entertainments that he and Alice had given and received during the two seasons they had spent in London, since Alice had been introduced, dwelling on titled names and on marks of attention received from magnates of the fashionable world, with a complacency that struck Sebastian as highly derogatory to the pride of the Earles of Earle's Court. Ruth had heard these stories often before, and did not fail to perceive that to-day such point as they possessed was different from what it had been in previous narrations. The moral intended to be conveyed was no longer that such and such a person had been struck by the delightful conversation, or the polite manners, or the well-arranged entertainments of Major Earle. Major Earle's daughter had somehow or other slipped into the prominent place, and Alice raised her eyes now and then with a look of appeal that was not lost on

Sebastion, when she found herself the subject of inuendoes so very far from being true.

Major Earle was one of those people who delight to approach their ends by elaborate winding ways, and who, at the same time, have not tact enough to hide one step of the way from the eyes of the bystanders. Before dinner was half over Sebastion knew what Major Earle's plans and thoughts with respect to him were, as well as if he had looked into his heart; and Alice, glancing every now and then at his disapproving face, knew that he knew.

When dinner was at length over, and the two girls were alone together in the great drawing-room, Ruth began for the first time to enjoy her holiday. She did not enter at once into eager, happy, confidential talk with her friend, as most young girls would have done; neither she nor Alice had the light-heartedness or freedom from cares that belongs to youth. They had arrived at a knowledge

which, to most people, comes later in life ; that often the best proof of sympathy between friends is the freedom of being silent together. Alice seated herself on a low chair by the fire, shading her cheek from the heat by an almost transparent hand, and looking dreamily at the rising and falling flames. Ruth wandered about the large half-lighted room, pausing now and then in the deep windows to look out on the garden lying bleak and withered under the chill March moon, and then, turning to notice with pleasure the broad shadows in the room, the ruddy, uncertain light on the ceiling and white chimney-piece, and Alice's drooping figure and wrapt face, which now looked distinct in light and then faded to a ghost-like whiteness as the flames fell. After a time she brought a stool and seated herself at Alice's feet ; she saw that the most pressing thoughts had had their way, and that she might now look up into her cousin's face without intrusion. Whatever had been passing through

her mind, some gentle thought had come at last, for her half-raised eyes were full of tender light and a sweet, dreamy smile parted her perfect lips. Ruth touched her hand to rouse her from her reverie ; she answered the appeal by putting her arm round her cousin's neck, and drawing her head down in a reclining posture to her knee ; but for a few minutes longer they were both silent. At last Ruth spoke in the tone of voice peculiar to her, abrupt and clear, but not loud :

" Alice," she said, " do you ever wish to change places with any one ? "

" Almost every day," said Alice, sadly.

" I used to do ; I did last night, but I never shall again. I see now quite clearly that it would not do any good—no change of *place* would do ; I don't think even dying would. —I almost wonder why people wish to die when they are unhappy. The right thing must be to stay in one's place till one has left off being unhappy in it—till one has made it do for one."

"You ought to have been a boy, Ruth," said Alice, looking wonderingly at the resolute little upturned face, so different to her own.

"I used to think so, but I have changed my mind. I am a girl, and I will make *that* do."

"Do what?" asked Alice, smiling.

"I don't know yet, but don't laugh at me, Alice; there is one thing that I must do. I should like to stand between those I love and harm; I don't care for many people, just one or two; mamma above all. If I could see them safe, and stand by and ward off every evil from them, I should not care for anything else. I think I could bear anything that came only on myself."

It was the language of an untried heart; Alice, who had gone a step or two further in her experience of life, knew it; but she did not care to contradict her cousin, and Ruth went on:—

"Alice, I wonder if you know how much

I hate injustice and cruelty ; how dreadful it is to me to think of weak people being trampled upon, how it half kills me to have to stand by and see. There are verses in the psalms which mamma says she does not understand when I read them to her, but I do ; words about the righteous triumphing and the wicked being trampled under foot."

"But, Ruth, suppose in your thoughts you were to make a mistake about who these wicked people are," said Alice, half frightened at the indignant flash that came into the dark eyes she was looking down upon, and knowing well the direction Ruth's thoughts were taking, "are you not afraid of taking too much upon yourself?"

"No," Ruth said ; "if my friends won't stand up for themselves, I must stand up for them ; I don't see that there is anyone else to do it. You see it is just the weak people I am obliged to trouble myself about."

"Then you will have to trouble yourself

about me, Ruth," Alice said. "I am a weak person; I never felt it so much as I do to-night."

"Alice, I can't bear to hear you say such things. I have always a sore place about you in my heart; if you would only hold up your head, and think better of yourself, I should be happier."

"That would not do," Alice said; "there is some change wanted in me, but it is not that. It would be no comfort to me to think highly of myself; it would not make me really stronger. I want something else, something out of myself to trust to."

"Oh, Alice, take care who it is," said Ruth, quickly.

They were silent for a minute or two, and a half-formed thought rose in Ruth's mind. She had heard often enough that there was one Strong One, who had promised to bear the weaknesses of all weak people; instead of offering her own support, might it not be bet-

ter to suggest the thought of Him. As yet, however, it was only an opinion with her, not a belief, that there was such a one ; and it did not look real enough to bring before the actual strong facts of life. She felt that it would be appealing to something very distant and dim to oppose what was pressing and near. She let the opportunity pass, and turned to another topic.

"I wish," she said "that I could look into your heart, Alice, and find out what you really want, then I should know what to wish for you ; if I had the ordering of things, how I should like to honour people like you and mamma, meek people who never will take anything for themselves. I would give you everything, I would crown you, you should reign."

"But we should not be fit for it, it would not do for us, Ruth—you are giving your own wishes to us."

"Tell me some of yours, then."

But Alice did not answer immediately, for she really did not know. Some time ago, per-

haps, if she had told the real truth, she could have said that all she asked of fate was to be allowed to go on dreaming—wandering for ever in the “fair shadow-land,” satisfied with the communion she found there, and only asking never by any shock of sorrow or pressure of care to be called back to earth.

Lately, very lately, new thoughts had been stirring within her. She had looked long enough into the magic mirror where the doings of the outer world were reflected coldly in moonlight, and she was beginning to be sick of shadows. If she had earnestly sought for words to express the real inmost wish of her heart, they would not have been long in coming. It could have clothed itself in three words—to be loved. But Alice had no wish to investigate the secrets of her heart too deeply just then.

The moaning sound of the March wind, as it swept round the many corners and projecting points and galleries of the old house,

filled up the pauses of the talk, and suggested a thought to Alice that enabled her to avoid answering Ruth's question.

"Ruth," she said, "don't you think that, while we are sitting here in the dark, by the fire, without taking the least glance from any of the windows, we might still be sure that it is a spring and not a winter's evening; I hear a difference in the sound of the wind. There seems to me to be quite a different cadence in it now from what there has been all through the past winter nights when I have sat here alone and listened. Then it seemed to blow one triumphant note, sweeping through the trees and round and round the house with a strong rush; now it comes in short, petulant, angry gushes. Spring and winter are contending together, I think I can hear the two voices; one angry and loud, proclaiming its right to stay, warning the other off; and then—now, in that little moan that comes when the great gust has died away, can't you almost

fancy that you hear the words 'I am coming, I am coming.'"

"So you tell tales in the twilight still, Alice."

The two girls jumped up hastily from their seats at the sound of a voice behind them.

Sebastion had entered the room unperceived, and was standing close to Alice's chair. It was too dark to see the expression of his face, but Alice remembered her father's warning and felt confused and vexed with herself.

"I have been talking great nonsense," she said, looking anxiously into the darkness to see if her father were following; "but it is only now and then that I am so silly—you must not suppose that I am quite the same now as when I was a child."

"Alice, I wish you were," Sebastion said, heartily.

The tone, quite different from anything they had heard from him yet, took the cousins by surprise. Neither of them said

anything. Sebastian walked away, and began to pace up and down before the darkened windows. The constrained tone of Alice's answer, her uneasy look, had dispelled the momentary illusion of old happy times that the twilight scene had called up; but after seeing that, it must take him a minute or two to harden into his usual manner. Alice meanwhile resumed her seat and looked into the fire.

The entrance of Major Earle and tea and lights put an end to the embarrassing silence. Alice played and sang after tea, at her father's request, as she would have done for any other visitor, a little less well than usual, Ruth thought.

For once Ruth was quite ready to go when her uncle, in his usual condescending way, informed her that the carriage was ready to take her home. The visit had been very unlike any former one, and though she brought away several things to think about, she had less of the sense of rest and refresh-

ment than she usually gained from her holidays with Alice.

It was a pity, for the home cares were waiting to seize upon her as soon as she entered the house-door.

Caroline opened it, and put up her hand with a signal for quiet as she and Sebastion entered.

"There, don't make any more noise than you can help," she said; "mamma is asleep at last."

"Has she been more unwell than usual?" Ruth asked anxiously.

"Oh! very bad indeed," returned Caroline, with the peculiar doleful drawl in her voice which meant very little because it came for very unequal causes—"but there, go into the dining-room and I will tell you."

"You have had a bad day then," said Ruth, when they had entered the room.

"Oh! as bad as possible—Aunt Harriet in such a temper, and mamma in one of her

spasms. I knew it would be so—it always is when one has had a little bit of pleasure, or when you are out, Ruth, so that it may all come upon me.”

“And now, what has happened?” asked Sebastian, who thought the preface rather long.

“I am going to tell you,” Caroline said, in a piqued tone of voice. “It was Tom’s doing; these things almost always are. Just because Ruth was not here to watch him every moment of his playhours, he got into the china closet, climbed on one of the shelves, and tried to look into that large china jar that Aunt Harriet cares so much about, because Uncle Arthur gave it to her. He thought he heard Aunt Harriet coming, and his foot slipped—he fell backwards, and—”

“Broke his head, I suppose,” interrupted Sebastian, impatiently.

“Oh dear, no!—he was very little hurt; it was much worse; he pulled the jar down with

him and broke it entirely to pieces. Mamma came running down stairs at the noise—you may imagine how frightened she was.”

“What *did* Aunt Harriet say?” asked Ruth, breathlessly.

“Well, on the whole, less than one might have expected ; she only said that she saw we had all made up our minds to break everything in the house she valued, and so that we had better do it as quickly as we could, and then she supposed there might be a little quiet. Poor mamma cried, and then one of the spasms came on very bad indeed, and she was obliged to go to bed. Aunt Harriet shut Tom up in the lumber-room, and of course mamma made herself miserable till he was let out again.”

“Well,” said Ruth, desperately, “I suppose my aunt and all of you mean to *kill* mamma—that will be the end of it.”

“Cousins,” said Sebastian, stopping short in a walk, quarter-deck fashion, which he had

commenced in the little room, "you appear to take very exaggerated views of things, and to use unwarrantably strong expressions. If you had known a little real hardship, and been knocked about the world, you would be ashamed of talking about the breaking of a china jar, or an old woman's scolding, as if it were a terrible misfortune. I can't understand why women will worry themselves and each other to death about trifles."

"Good night, cousin Sebastian, you *don't* understand," said Ruth, sadly, and with a little air of experience that sat oddly on her young face, "we don't make light of your hardships, so please don't you take upon yourself to talk about ours. If real hardship and knocking about the world can make everyday troubles easy to bear, I don't care how soon they come to me—they will be welcome."

CHAPTER VIII.

"The world's a room of sickness where each heart
Knows its own anguish and unrest,
The truest wisdom there and noblest art
Is his who skills of comfort best."

KEBLE.

IN looking back upon our lives, we are often surprised to find how distinctly the years divide themselves in our memory into periods, and how the end of one period and the beginning of another is often marked by some very slight event which, at the time of its occurrence, seemed very little likely to affect the current of our existence. We are going on in a regular routine, perhaps tranquilly, perhaps sadly; "the slow, sad hours," or "the slow sweet hours," are stretched

out before us, a long, even, well-defined track, prepared for our feet to walk in; suddenly some slight event occurs, perhaps it is only a word or two said, and a cloud-curtain falls between us and the old life we thought to go on so securely leading; we don't, perhaps, find it out all at once, some misty days follow, we think to grope out again into the old pastures, but at last we see clearly; the "past is past," we can never possibly go back to it again, we have come out upon a new country, and unaccustomed ways lie before us. A change of this kind in Ruth's life might have been dated from the evening when she came home from Earle's Court, and found her mother more unwell than usual. Mrs. Brandon did not recover from the effects of her two days' agitation as quickly as she had recovered from similar attacks often before. She was obliged to stay in her room for about a week, and when she came down-stairs again and resumed her place on the sofa she did not fall

into quite her old habits again ; her thin, pale fingers plied the needle more slowly than ever, the work fell oftener from her trembling hands, her eyes that used to roam about the room, so anxiously watching against possible causes of offence, were now oftenest closed with the contraction that betokens inward pain ; and when Ruth, as was her wont, came every now and then to the sofa to break the monotony of the day by a few moments' talk, she had seldomer and seldomer to answer the old eager questions about the children's occupations and welfare, and oftener to be satisfied with the reiterated sentence which was all her mother's compressed lips could form :

“ I am suffering ! dear child, I am suffering—”

For a time all the members of the household felt a great deal of sorrow on account of Mrs. Brandon's increased illness, and Ruth's angry suspicion that no one but herself cared enough about her mother was set at rest. She was first

in everyone's thought, and her gentle, loving spirit expanded in warm gratitude in return. In spite of anxiety and pain, something almost like the warm sunshine of family-love and peace rested upon the house for a time ; but days passed, Mrs. Brandon did not get any better, and yet it was always the same story. The doctors began to shake their heads and talk about nerves, and the watchers round began to be just a little weary of having such constant claims made upon their sympathy. It is very difficult to be always saying, " I am sorry for you ; " very difficult to go on for long making another person's sufferings the chief thought of your life.

It is usual to say that mental sorrows obtain the least amount of sympathy, and yet perhaps, those people who are called upon to go on for years, suffering acute physical pain, could tell us better than any how poor and failing a thing human sympathy is.

It is not, perhaps, want of kindness that

makes so many of us shrink from hearing over and over again the sad description of bitter and hopeless bodily pain ; it is oftenest want of strength, we can't bear it so often, it hurts us too much to hear it ; if the sufferers can't escape we must, and so we try to cheat ourselves and them with palliatives.

“ You are a little better to-day, though you don't think so,” we say, when the endless complaint is poured out ; “ there is a great deal of nervousness in what you feel, you had better not talk about it,” and speaking so, we add the chill of loneliness to the fire of pain. He must have a heart strong and noble to the very core who can be always ready at the sufferer's call, who can give the hand fearlessly and go down into the very torture-chamber and count all the groans, each one of which falls like a wound, who can listen without ever wearying to the cry, always the same, “ I am suffering, oh ! I am suffering,” and never fail to have a pitying answer ready for each appeal.

The different members of Mrs. Brandon's family behaved under this test of character, in the way in which their various habits of self-indulgence or self-discipline had prepared them to do. Caroline suffered, as she told all her friends, very much indeed from the sight of what her poor dear mamma had to go through; it was often more than she could bear to stay in the room, and as she found there really was nothing to be done and no help for it, she less and less often *did* stay in the room.

"Go out and amuse yourself, dearest," her mamma would say, when she saw her sitting with white cheeks and tearful eyes, "go and get the fresh air—I shall like to hear what you have to say when you come back."

And Caroline went out into the sunshiny spring air and came back fresh and rosy, and it saddened her to meet always that dejected look on her return, and to be greeted with the same intelligence.

“I have had a bad day, my dear ; I have been in pain.”

She began to think and to say, that it was a pity poor dear mamma gave way so, and was so fanciful, and that it would be much better for herself and everyone else if she would only exert herself a little.

Frederick came home in good time every day for a fortnight, and he found that the house was gloomier and stiller, and more intolerable than ever. “What good could he possibly do ?” he asked of himself, and candidly answering that he was only in the way and made things worse, he persuaded himself that there was even a kind of merit in seeking his own amusement as much as possible elsewhere.

Miss Earle tried to be sympathising just at first, but she could not forget herself and her own claims for very long. She began to think, after a time, that it was very *hard* upon *her* to have to witness so much suffering. She

had been used to pity herself and to consider herself an injured person for so many years that it seemed like a sort of usurpation for anyone to put in a superior claim to compassion. By some ingenious way of looking at things she managed to reinstate herself before long, and Mrs. Brandon began to have a faint idea that her distressing illness was a new proof of the family ingratitude of which her sister had so much reason to complain. Ruth's sympathy alone never wore out or changed; she had said that she wished above all things to stand between those she loved and suffering. She had something still harder given her to do—she had to stand by, without being able to help, and witness suffering, and she bore it well. She never talked at all about what she felt, she shed very few tears; but she was always ready, she never shrank from hearing any complaint, she never cheated herself or her patient by any false representation. Mrs. Brandon turned instinctively to her

for everything, and by degrees the entire charge of the invalid was tacitly given over into her hands.

Some of Ruth's old cares and anxieties seemed to pass away with the coming of this greater one. Sebastian's presence made a very favourable change in the household. He came and went, not precisely forming part of the family, but holding all its members in a very salutary awe. Caroline was more sensible and less affected when kept in check by dread of his plain-spoken observations. In his presence Frederick remembered to be respectful to his aunt and refrained from teasing his sisters ; the children, by his influence, became more manageable, and Miss Earle occupied herself so entirely all the evening, in trying, by a close system of cross-questioning, to discover where Sebastian had been during the day, that she had much less time and inclination than formerly to notice shortcomings in other members of the family.

Ruth, sitting on her stool in the darkest

part of the room by her mother's sofa, often had her thoughts diverted from her great anxiety by the interest she could not help taking in the word-skirmishes that passed every night between these two, whose powers of resistance and strength of will were so nearly matched as to make the victory always doubtful.

Sebastion, who had perhaps only one secret in the world that he really cared to keep, had, nevertheless, like all very proud people, an intense dislike to having his small daily occupations made the subject of remark. He would go on for a whole evening perseveringly evading his aunt's efforts to discover whether he had walked up the town or down the town, or whether or not he had made an unimportant call upon a neighbour ; while Miss Earle, whose love of ruling made it intolerable to her that anyone should do anything without her knowledge, laid plans to discover his secret with strange pertinacity. Ruth discovered

before long, however, that there was one point on which Sebastian was vulnerable. With all his wariness and reserve, he never succeeded in hiding any of his visits to Earle's Court from his aunt's penetration; and yet it was just those very visits, as Ruth divined, that he least liked to talk about.

From her seat in the dark corner she soon learned to know a particular compression of her cousin's lips, a sort of straightening of the figure and steadying of the eye, that betokened on certain evenings that he found the ordeal of questions more disagreeable than usual: then there was sure to come, before long, some hasty answer or imprudent admission, and the secret that Ruth had already guessed was betrayed.

After one of these discoveries the conversation for the rest of the evening always lay with Miss Earle; contrary to her usual custom, she then became voluble, and branched off into very various discourse—discourse on va-

rious topics, indeed, but all tending to one point, and having one moral, namely, the utter mismanagement and shameful extravagance that had been going on at Earle's Court ever since he left it; and the folly, vanity, deceitfulness, and general misconduct of Major Earle and his daughter. Sebastion sat still under the torrent of words, generally with immoveable countenance, crossing t's and dottings i's in the memorandum-book, in which it was his habit to write briefly in the evening; or else going on industriously tracing out routes, or marking localities in the maps he took special delight in studying. Sometimes, when Miss Earle left off declaiming, and related here and there a fact, he would raise his eyes for a moment, and then Ruth discerned the painful intentness with which, through all the seeming indifference, he was taking in every word. Sometimes the steadfast face grew a little graver and sterner, and Ruth discovered that this was, when the facts, true in themselves, but

always looked at a little awry, were intended to illustrate Miss Earle's favourite view of Alice's character, that she was wanting in truthfulness.

Even for Alice's sake, Ruth would not now have risked one moment of her mother's repose by provoking discussion; and yet when Alice came the morning after one of these talks, and brought her gentle face and the music of her tender voice into the sick-room, Ruth felt very much like a traitor for her silence, and lost half the pleasure she would otherwise have had in her visit.

Alice was peculiarly in her element in a sick-room, her sympathy was very different from Ruth's; it did not lie so deep, but it was pleasant and soothing, and she had far more tact in drawing the invalid's attention from her own sufferings and suggesting just the right subjects of thought.

In the quiet hours she spent with Mrs. Brandon and Ruth, Alice brought out all

those powers of conversation which were so apt to put themselves away on occasions when her father thought they ought to be most at hand. Touching stories, quaint thoughts, little sparkles of playful wit, fell from her lips like the pearls and diamonds of the enchanted princess in fairy tale, when there was no one present but those two to gather them up ; and long painful mornings and dull afternoons were almost imperceptibly charmed away.

Sometimes, when it was drawing towards evening, and the shadows were beginning to lengthen in the room, Alice would draw her chair a little closer still to Mrs. Brandon's sofa, and with her head half resting among the pillows and her face nearly hidden, she would say :—

“ Now I will tell you something quite true,— I will tell you something that happened to our cousin Sebastian on his travels.”

The story always began in plain, unadorned

words, such as Ruth easily believed to have been Sebastian's own ; but as it went on, Alice raised her head from the pillow, Ruth could see her soft eyes beginning to shine in the twilight, the words came quicker, and grew more eloquent, one picturesque detail after another was thrown into the story ; the scenery, the actions, the incidents, rose vivid and life-like before the listener's eyes ; it was easy to see that the narrator had lived it over again in her heart.

"Was it not generous," or "was it not brave?" Alice would end with, and then, the excitement over, her head sank back into its hiding-place, and her voice dropped into its usual low tone.

"But Sebastian never told you all that," Ruth would object, strenuously ; "he hates to be questioned about his travels, he never tells anybody anything."

"It came out quite accidentally last night when we were talking of other things," Alice

would say ; “ perhaps I ought not to have repeated it,” and then a shade of anxiety would pass over her face, but it was not precisely painful anxiety—and Ruth divined that these stories lost nothing in Alice’s estimation from the knowledge that they had small chance of coming to light excepting through her intervention.

Making every allowance for the adorning of Alice’s fancy, there was substance enough in the incidents she related to make the subject of them something of a hero, and Ruth watched Sebastian in the evening over his map-making and his word-skirmishes with daily-increasing wonder and interest.

It was, however, simply as studies of character that Ruth watched the passages that were going on around her ; other people, with less opportunities of seeing, were busy drawing conclusions, which were very slow in presenting themselves to her mind.

It must be confessed that it was not because

she had never had her attention turned to the absorbing interest of watching for signs of love-making that she was so blind on this occasion. Her sister Caroline kept her ingenuity in constant exercise; it was rather by dint of often hearing, and often being called upon to weigh doubtful sentences, and decide on the genuineness of very opposite tokens, that she had come to consider the entire subject as one involved in inextricable difficulties, and altogether too recondite for her understanding. For the last year Caroline had always had some standing puzzle of this nature, which served as an endless topic of talk when she and Ruth were alone together. With her it was all play-anxiety and play-sentiment. Ruth listened to her stories and conjectures with sisterly sympathy, but it never occurred to her that from these apparently trivial amusements any result affecting her sister's life might actually arise.

One morning, about six weeks after the commencement of her mother's illness, she

was rather suddenly startled out of her habitual indifference and forced to receive a new light on many things that were going on around her, and to face possibilities that had hitherto appeared very unsubstantial indeed.

It was something in Caroline's talk, a little more earnest than usual, that awakened the new anxiety. The sisters were in their room together, Ruth helping Caroline to prepare for a walk. Caroline had come up stairs in a very forlorn state of mind. Every day, as the spring-weather brightened, she felt more and more reluctant to dress herself in the old, worn, dark bonnet and unseasonably heavy cape that had undergone the whole winter's wear; and yet it was impossible to contradict what Ruth constantly urged, that it was better to wear anything, however shabby, than to trouble their mother just now about dress. Caroline was not selfish enough to wish to have her vanity gratified at the expense of her mother's

comfort, but she was not unselfish enough to bear the inconvenience without grumbling about it. She stood for a long time that morning keeping Ruth out of her mother's room, while she twisted the unhappy-looking bonnet round and round on her hand, and pulled out the weather-stained ribbons, making them look all the worse by exposing their deficiencies to the sun.

"It does not matter so very much for this morning, does it Caroline?" said Ruth, who began to feel a little impatient; "you are only going to call on Miss Ash and Mrs. Warren—I am sure your bonnet will look well enough when it is on."

"It is very easy for you to talk, Ruth," said Caroline, "it is very easy for you not to mind about your bonnet, but it is quite different with me."

"Oh! I know that, of course," said Ruth, approaching the subject bluntly; "but I don't think that you will meet any of the people

you care to look well for. William Ash has gone back to college you know."

Caroline tossed her handsome head.

"William Ash! as if I should care what a boy like him thinks of my dress; he ought to be glad enough to see me in any bonnet."

William was the last hero over whose enigmatical sayings Ruth had been called to puzzle; this sudden indifference perplexed her, she was at a loss what to say. Caroline went on turning over the bonnet, and by degrees a little self-complacent look softened the discontent on her pretty face.

"Ruth!" she said, the corners of her mouth relaxing into a smile, "has it ever occurred to you what a strange thing it would be if it should turn out that after all Mr.—well—Mr. Gadstone, meant something?"

"But, my dear, what could he possibly mean? he is so old," cried Ruth, in dismay, "and oh! Caroline, so very fat and ugly."

"Now how unkind you are," said Caroline,

turning away ; "you would not have spoken so, if it had been Alice who had asked you."

The idea seemed almost profane to Ruth ; she thought it most prudent to let it pass and keep to the point in question.

"But surely, Caroline," she said, "you never could care anything about such a person as Mr. Gadstone."

"Care !" Caroline became very prettily contemptuous ; of course *she* did not care, only when a person kept on saying things, it was natural to be a little curious to know what he meant ; "you know, Ruth," Caroline insisted, "I have repeated a great many of his speeches to you lately, only you have never seemed to take them in. You must remember what I told you he said on the day when we went to lunch at his house after the bazaar, about the duty of hospitality, and about entertaining angels unawares. Miss Ash thinks he meant Mr. Barret, and that he was

referring to the edifying address he gave us before lunch; but I don't know, I am sure Mr. Gadstone looked at me."

"Oh! if that is all," cried Ruth, much relieved, "I don't think it is worth talking about. You know William Ash, and that Captain Bellamy, and young Mr. Wilton have said things to you about angels, over and over again, and I have heard you say yourself that you would never think anything of *that* again."

"So I did," said Caroline, with a sigh, "and I am sure nothing can be more difficult than to know what people really do mean. But you see this time, it is perhaps rather different, for Mr. Gadstone is older, and he is not accustomed to say such things, and I am sure he looked as if it had cost him immense trouble to think of that one; however, if you really think there is nothing in it—"

"I am sure I hope not," interrupted Ruth, growing alarmed; "if you were obliged to

refuse him, what a bad thing it would be for Frederick."

"Or, on the other hand, what a wonderfully good thing it might be for Frederick," said Caroline, brightening as her sister grew serious; "you must not suppose that you are the only person who can make sacrifices, Ruth; I am sure I have the good of the family as much at heart as you have. I am quite ready to do my part, and it is natural enough to suppose that it should be different from yours, as there is such a difference between us—I don't think I am made for drudging like you, or for always looking after the children, or for having Aunt Harriet, and anxiety about one's dress, and one thing and another for ever upon my mind; everyone has their own sphere of duty, as Mr. Barret says."

"But are you in earnest, Caroline? Mr. Gadstone is so very, very unlike William Ash, or any of the other people you have fancied you liked."

"Different, indeed!" echoed Caroline, "to be sure; no one would ever think of comparing him in looks or anything with William Ash, or Captain Bellamy, or even Mr. Wilton, (each of these had stood first in his day, Ruth remembered) but then what is one to do. I do think, and I really shall always think, that poor William likes me, but then you see he has gone back to college without saying a word; a decided word I mean, for certainly that last evening after church he did say something rather particular; did I tell it to you, Ruth?"

"Oh! yes; and really, Caroline, I don't think that it is anything different from what he has said every time of his going away since he knew you. People must be very stupid, for no one ever seems to say anything fresh to you."

The desire of hearing something quite fresh, something of which the meaning would not have to be puzzled over, came for a moment

so strong into poor Caroline's mind that the question of who should be the utterer of the desired speech seemed of quite minor importance. No romantic desire of meeting with a kindred spirit perplexed her brain ; her wishes were quite simple and practical, she only wanted to be *settled*, and one way alone of being settled had ever presented itself to her as possible. She tied her bonnet-strings with a profound sigh, and finished dressing in silence.

As she followed her sister down-stairs, the subject of her meditation betrayed itself in a concluding remark :—

“After all, Ruth,” she said, pausing before the half-open door of her mother's room, “why should I think it necessary to be more particular than Alice?”

“What do you mean about Alice?” asked Ruth, rather sharply.

“You need not be cross, Ruth ; I know you think Alice a thousand times prettier and

better than I am ; and yet it is quite true, Mrs. Warren and Miss Ash both think that Alice would have been very glad to have married Mr. Gadstone before Sebastian came back ; now of course Sebastian will do much better, for though he will never be a quarter as rich as Mr. Gadstone is, yet he is heir to Earle's Court, and he would suit Major Earle so much better ; indeed," (and here Caroline lowered her voice to a mysterious whisper,) " people say that uncle Earle is dreadfully in debt, and that he will have to leave England unless something of that sort happens soon."

" My dears, I wish you would not whisper," Mrs. Brandon's feeble voice called from the bed, " it makes me so nervous. I am sure there is something the matter ; come in Ruth, and tell me what it is at once."

Vexed with herself for her want of consideration, Ruth entered the room without another word ; but the mischief was done, Mrs. Brandon's fears were roused, and Ruth

had to exhaust herself in protestations and enter into an exact account of the whereabouts of each one of the children before she could gain any credit for her words.

In truth, her face contradicted her assurances emphatically enough to excuse Mrs. Brandon's incredulity, and she looked so absent and unhappy during the whole morning that Mrs. Brandon could not help perpetually making timid suggestions of possible misfortunes, which she thought Ruth was obstinately hiding from her.

Up to this time Ruth had treated Caroline's constant suggestions about her own and other people's marriages with calm contempt. They served for Caroline to talk about, she considered; and in the meantime she went on with her own thoughts, planning ways to keep the boys out of mischief, or longing for unattainable comforts for her mother.

Now that she found herself obliged to face the subject in earnest, she was proportionally

disconcerted. Caroline's fate she dare not even think about at present—Alice's danger struck her as more pressing.

If it really were true that Major Earle's interest required it, Ruth thought it quite natural that Alice should be ready to sacrifice herself; but the longer she thought of Alice and Sebastian together, the more terrible the sacrifice appeared to her to be; that Alice could choose such a lot for herself never occurred to her, and with her usual wish to constitute herself a champion of distress, Ruth resolved to interpose at least a remonstrance. With Alice's gentle dignity it required some courage to enter on such a subject unbidden; but Ruth was by no means wanting in courage, or easily kept back, when she fancied there was anything she could do to serve those she loved. The opportunity of speaking occurred before her fears had time to calm themselves to a reasonable point. About an hour after Caroline had left the house, Alice called on

her way to Kingsmills with her father. She could only stay a few minutes, and she ran up stairs to her aunt's room, with her hands full of spring-flowers that she was bringing to her. Ruth, having now, as she thought, her eyes opened, fancied she saw unfathomable depths of sorrow, anxiety, and self-sacrifice, in the beautiful face, which happened to be that morning a shade paler than usual. When Alice had taken leave of her mother, she followed her out of the room, carefully shutting the door after them this time; and when they had got half way down the stairs, she stopped short and entered on her remonstrance hurriedly:

"Alice," she said, "I want to say something to you before you go, you must wait a moment. Do you remember the last evening I spent at Earle's Court, when you and I were talking, I said: 'I should like to be able to put myself between those I loved and harm; but, Alice, it would not do for you, and

the way you are thinking of is not a right way : you must not do it? ”

“ Do what, dear?” asked Alice, soothingly.

“ What Caroline says you mean to do. You must not, to please your father, or any one, marry Sebastian. Oh, Alice ! I know so well how it would be if you did. I see it all. He is just one of those terribly strong, silent people, the weight of whose will crushes one to death. You could never live and be yourself near him. Don’t be angry with me for saying this, but I know you would be frightened of him, and, Alice, you might get to be what Aunt Harriet calls you—deceitful. You might *never* be able to speak the truth to him—and think of going on like that all your life !”

In her agitation Ruth spoke loud, and did not see how pale Alice grew as she went on. They were standing face to face, Ruth a step below Alice, with her back to the hall. Without answering, Alice made a gesture of entreaty to her to let her pass on, and then

Ruth turned and saw what Alice had seen all the time, that Sebastion, who had come into the hall to put Alice into the carriage, was standing close to the stairs. He had been looking at Alice while Ruth was speaking, and both had been too much agitated to stop her. When she had once seen her cousin Sebastion's face, Ruth could hardly take her eyes from it again—the expression was so different from anything she had ever expected to see there. It was agitated and sorrowful, but without a shade of anger in it. As soon as they all stood together at the foot of the stairs, he spoke:

“I beg your pardon for having overheard your warning, Ruth. Don't suppose that I am angry with you for it. With such an opinion of me, you are right, and I am glad that Alice has such an honest friend. I, too, would tell her, if I might, as emphatically as you have done, not for any motive to sacrifice herself through any false generosity. You are right in calling that untrue, and in prophecy-

ing that a life-time of regret would follow. Let Alice take the warning again from me."

A look that Ruth did not understand passed over Alice's face ; for an instant she looked steadily at Sebastian, and a smile of sad wonder played on her lips.

" You are mistaken, both of you, in what you think of me," she said, at length, so humbly that no pride could have had half as much dignity in it ; then, after stooping down to leave a kiss of forgiveness on Ruth's forehead, she walked quickly down the hall to the door, and put herself in the carriage without waiting for Sebastian's assistance.

Mortally afraid of encountering another of Sebastian's looks, Ruth ran up stairs, and shut herself in her mother's room for the rest of the day. She pondered a good deal at intervals on what had passed, and concluded at last that even Caroline's puzzles might be matched by mysteries still further removed from the sphere of her comprehension.

CHAPTER IX.

"Shy she was, and I thought her cold,
Thought her proud, and fled over the sea,
Filled I was with folly and spite,
When Ellen Adair was dying for me."

TENNYSON.

SEBASTION left the house as soon as Major Earle's carriage was out of sight, and set off on a quick walk through the streets of Kingsmills, not caring particularly where he went, but intent on working off his agitation by quick motion, and giving certain half-formed projects which had suddenly risen in his mind time to think themselves out. From constant habit he took the road to Earle's Court, and by the time he was in a condition to reflect where he was going, he found himself close to the great

gates that led into the yard of the manufactory at the Leasows. He paused there; it fell in with the resolution at which he had arrived now to imagine that there was a necessity for his seeing his brother immediately, and after a moment's longer reflection, he turned in to enquire for him. During the six weeks he had been in Kingsmills, he had come to know the ways of the Meyer family pretty well, and to come and go among them without ceremony. He was free of Maxwell's studio, and had sometimes paced it, quarter-deck fashion, by the hour together; he had even penetrated as far as the counting-house and taken some pains to understand his brother's work there. The life that went on in this little world, toilsome, but monotonous, without variety and yet passed in a crowd, was especially distasteful to his restless, adventurous, and yet lonely spirit. Every visit showed him more and more clearly the great gulph which education, circumstances, per-

haps character, had placed between himself and his brother, and yet he went on coming, always with some faint hope that something would happen to bring them nearer to each other—often repulsing, and never making any advances towards greater confidence, and yet always perversely going away dissatisfied because they had not been made. A glance at his watch told him that there would be no use in seeking Maxwell in the house. It was just the busiest hour of the day to Mr. Meyer, and to such of his family as were old enough to be of any use. It was the interval (longer in this than in other manufactories of the town) allowed in the middle of the day for rest and refreshment, and, strange as it may sound, for the amusement and instruction of those among the work-people who found amusement or instruction the best kind of rest.

Mr. Meyer had been received as junior partner by the wealthy speculator who had

established the manufactory, because he expected him to prove a good manager of the works; by some peculiarity of his character he had also made himself manager of the men. Step by step, without anyone quite knowing how, a new, and hitherto undreamed of influence had risen up among them; new thoughts and wishes circulated, and when plans grew out of the thoughts, it seemed quite an accidental circumstance that they were always referred to Mr. Meyer, and that he was always ready to meet them half way. Some of these plans were new enough and strange enough to occasion a great deal of surprise and disapprobation at first, but they were found to answer; Mr. Meyer took all the trouble and none of the credit of them, and so they went on.

Just as Sebastian entered the yard, a troop of boys were emerging from a large school-room built at the end of the yard, where, by their own choice, they had been resting their

bodies and improving their minds at the same time. Maxwell and Harry Meyer came out after them, and Sebastian hastened across the yard to greet his brother before anyone else claimed his attention. Harry, who was still new to the dignified office of instructor, looked important; but Max, it must be confessed, came out of the crowded room into the soft spring air with something very like a sigh of weariness. Sebastian saw it with pleasure, it gave him just the excuse he had come in search of, for pressing his favorite project on his brother for what he believed would be the last time.

"Come, Max," he said, as they shook hands, "confess for once that you are heartily tired of this work."

"Not a bit of it," answered Max, stretching and yawning vigorously, nevertheless, "who can think of being tired in the middle of a spring day? Only I have been talking at the very top of my voice for half

an hour, and I don't mean to say a word to please anyone for the next. Do you see those lads who are going to work in their gardens by the river side? Harry and I must follow to look after them; if you have any curiosity to see agriculture on the very smallest scale, come with us; if not, go into the house, and I will join you as soon as I possibly can."

The bounding step with which Max ran across the yard did not betray any weariness of spirit; Sebastian followed more slowly. Outside the yard, part of a field skirting the river had been converted into a number of very small gardens, and among them Maxwell's late scholars spread themselves eagerly. Harry went to a tool-shed and began to distribute garden-tools among the workers, but Max, after a word or two of directions, took a book out of his pocket, and, opening it, sauntered slowly down to the river, reading as he walked.

When he came to the edge of the water he seated himself on some stone-steps that led to

a landing-place near, with his back to the gardens; the sweet spring air blew in his face, the trees of Earle's Court, brilliant with their first tender green, waved in front of him, the slow river rippled past at his feet; he had Spencer's Fairy Queen in his hand; it mattered very little to him that the dusty manufactory-yard and the noisy workers lay a yard or two behind him; he had half an hour to himself, and he meant to make the most of it. By-and-bye, Harry, having finished the duties entrusted to him, stole up:

"May I come?" he said.

Maxwell just glanced up.

"Yes, there is plenty of room, but remember—not a word. I am here at the middle of the page, but I will wait for you to read up."

"Oh! never mind, it does not much signify. I can always begin where you are," said Harry, the hero-worshipper; and seating himself by his brother's side, and leaning

against his knee, he was in a moment the most absorbed reader of the two. Max had a glance to spare now and then for the trees and the sky and the river, but Harry, in two stanzas, was lost in fairy-land. Sebastion paced up and down the walk for some time, and wondered whether the presence of those two entranced readers had anything to do with the quiet and orderly behaviour of the rough lads who were apparently so entirely left to their own control. He came to the conclusion that by some magic or other it had; he heard references to them pass round:—

“Don’t you make a row,” said one great boy to another, inclined for the moment to be fractious. “Don’t you see he is reading? He’ll tell it to us, maybe, by-and-bye; anyhow it would be a shame to disturb him.”

Each one of these, Sebastion thought, had more of his brother’s interest, knew him better, entered more into his life than he did.

The old sense of separation, of loneliness, entered deeper than ever into his soul. Why did he stay—he asked himself—where he alone was not wanted—out of place—bringing only fear, or dislike, or at best indifference? In his irritable mood the hum of voices, the incessant clang of machinery, the signs of brisk life on every side, became intolerable; he retreated to the house, and mounted the many flights of steps to Maxwell's studio, in the hope of being allowed to wait there alone till he could see his brother and finish his business with him.

Solitude was, however, just the one thing which was hardly to be had by any seeking for in the Meyers' house. Sebastian had not taken two turns up and down the long room before he was aware that two very pretty pairs of blue eyes, whose owners had emerged from some hidden corner near, were watching him from the doorway, with something of the awe with which they might have watched the

pacing up and down of a lion, or other caged wild beast. The intruders were Willie and Eva Meyer. The little lady, precisely because Sebastian paid her less homage than anyone else, distinguished him with special favour. Without any invitation, she boldly entered the room, and accosted him now, explaining with great distinctness and condescension that Willie had helped her up stairs that she might look once more at cousin Alice, who had got into a picture and was standing all by herself, with her face to the wall. Sebastian might creep into the corner and see too, if he liked. Willie, emulating his sister's courage, put in his explanation where hers stopped. Maxwell's great picture; there it was in the corner; cousin Alice had got into it. Max worked so hard at it every morning as soon as it was light—it was to be a greater picture than the great one that had gone to London, Harry said, and Harry knew.

Sebastion hardly listened to all this prattle, but the children almost imperceptibly drew him on to the further end of the room and made him understand the subject of their curiosity. It was a large canvas that had evidently been lately lifted from an easel that stood near and leaned against the wall. Eva's and Willie's way of seeing it was to crouch down on to the floor, and intrude their faces in the space between the wall and the canvas. Eva was absolutely sure that there was room enough for Sebastion's too, if he would only try, and at last Sebastion's interest was roused enough to induce him to lift the heavy canvas, and fix it on the easel near.

"There, now," said the children, clapping their hands, "we told you she was there, Max has made her get into that picture."

Sebastion took a step backwards to look at the picture more at his ease. There was something in it besides the likeness that made him glad, that only the two children were

there to watch him while he looked. The subject of the picture was taken from one of Tennyson's poems—"The Lady of Shalot." The scene was a small room in the turret of a castle, and had been chosen, perhaps, by the ambitious young artist for the sake of testing his powers of painting different and difficult lights.

It was evening, and a lamp burned above the magic room, casting a strong light on part of the finished web which rolled down in folds to the floor, showing here and there the interwoven pictures:

"The troop of damsels glad,
The abbot on an ambling pad,
The long-haired page in crimson clad."

In the mirror on the wall, the reflected landscape slept in softest moonlight through which two figures, hand-in-hand, wandered towards a distance, lost in hazy radiance.

Gazing intently into its depths, sat the fairy "Lady of Shalot."—Alice's face and figure, her very attitude, as Sebastian had so often seen it lately, the gentle dreaminess of the

face, touched with just a shade of dissatisfaction—"sick of shadows"—a wistful, intent look in the eyes, that presaged some coming change; it was just as the children had said;—Alice had got into the picture.

"Do you think she will never be able to get out again?" lisped Eva, beginning to augur something wrong from the silent gravity with which Sebastian looked.

"But it is not she herself," interposed Willie, proud of his superior understanding; "a person is not the same as a picture—she can walk about, and talk, and tell stories to us—she tells us stories whenever she comes to see us," he went on in explanation to Sebastian; "and even Max listens, they are so nice. Does she ever tell any to you? or are you not good enough, or too big? perhaps she thinks you are too big, and is afraid of you."

The child pulled Sebastian's hand for an answer, but got none; and the next minute the sound of Maxwell's bounding step coming

up the stairs, made them all turn round.

"I thought I should find you here," he exclaimed, cheerfully, as he entered, "and I am ready to do whatever you like now; but" (catching sight of the canvas on the easel, and speaking in an altered tone) "you have found out that, have you? what do you think of the likeness? I did not mean you to see it just yet."

"Why not?" asked Sebastion, sharply, passing over the first part of the question; "why should I not see this as well as any of your other pictures?"

"Because it is not finished, and it depends on circumstances how long it takes to finish it. Besides, it does not do to stand alone; I did not mean you to see it, till I had got the right idea for painting the companion picture. We must have sunlight, as well as moonlight. There is another scene to come.

'From the bank and from the river
He flashed into the crystal mirror.'

"Well," said Sebastion, turning away from

the picture with an impatient gesture, as if he were throwing off a spell; "I did not come here to look at your pictures. I am not an artist, my opinion about them is worth nothing; but, Maxwell, I came once more to talk over your future plans with you, and to try to find out, before I again leave England for an indefinite time, whether there is not any way in which I can be of use to you."

"Nay, you are not going to leave us again so soon; you are not surely thinking of leaving England," exclaimed Maxwell, surprised; then coming nearer, and speaking in a tone and with a look of sympathy, against which Sebastian's proud reserve rose up in arms, he added—"I hope that nothing—nothing painful has happened to make you leave us again so soon."

"Nothing whatever," Sebastian answered coldly; "it is not soon, I have been idle nearly two months, quite as long as I ever desire to be, when there is a chance of my getting employment; besides, I have had a letter this

morning that will explain anything in my resolution that may appear to be sudden. It is from my old friend, the first captain I ever sailed with—you see, he says that another expedition is to be sent out this summer, in search of the North-West Passage, and he hints that as I have already spent some years with him in the north seas, my services would be gladly accepted, if I were to volunteer them. It has been the great wish of my life to be employed on this service; and of course I am only too proud to have the opportunity offered me of going out with such a man; nothing could induce me to hang back now.”

The faintest glimmer of a smile came on Maxwell's face, but he took the letter without comment, read it carefully through, and returned it to his brother.

“It is a flattering letter,” he said, “you may well be proud of having it; but you will not sail with Sir J. F. for all that. He must look for some one else to go, for you will not.”

"I am going to London the day after to-morrow to see him, and make every necessary arrangement. In a month from this, I shall have left England."

"You will change your mind," Maxwell persisted, with rather provoking coolness.

Sebastion turned on his heel and walked away to the window.

Maxwell sauntered to his easel, took up a brush, and began putting a touch or two here and there, on the canvas, with loving hands; as he worked, he hummed a tune; by-and-bye the words of a ballad slipped out. Sebastion's ear was caught at last by one or two words, which seemed to come over and over again, oftener than necessary.

"Oh! Alice Brand, my native land,
I lost for love of you."

"What do you mean?" he asked, coming forward suddenly, when the song, without any apparent reason, had slipped back to this second verse three times over.

Maxwell looked up with an inscrutable face.

“Mean! why it is a song of Sir Walter Scott’s, from the ‘Lady of the Lake,’ or the ‘Lay of the Last Minstrel,’ which is it?”

Sebastion uttered an exclamation of anger, and was turning towards the door to leave the room, but Maxwell jumped up and stopped him, putting both hands on his shoulders, and looking him earnestly in the face.

“Now, Sebastion, I am in earnest,” he said; “I am going to tell you what I mean, and you shall listen. It is cutting the ground from under my own feet, but I will give you a warning; don’t be a fool, don’t behave like a foolish spoilt child; and, because you have every good thing the world can offer, throw sullenly away the very best—yes, the very best and sweetest that ever came near anyone. You cannot be so blind as not to see what a chance you have, and if you stand so much on your own reserve and pride as to throw it

away without an effort, I shall think you have the poorest heart—yes, the very poorest heart in the world. You understand what I mean, you need not say any more; in pity to your pride I will let you off an answer.”

Very quietly, and without any look of anger or impatience, Sebastion disengaged his shoulders from the detaining hands.

“ You do not understand me, Maxwell,” he said, “ you have never done; I am not acting from the motives you attribute to me, and the chance you speak of is a delusion of your own brain, conjured up by fancies that it is, perhaps, quite natural should be there. I am, however, equally obliged to you for your hint, though it is hardly to be expected that I should act upon it; you don’t seem to be in a humour to talk about your own affairs just now. I shall spend to-morrow, my last day before leaving Kingsmills, at Earle’s Court; but late in the evening I must come and have a long talk with you. There are one or two

arrangements I wish to make, one or two things I wish to do for my relations before I leave England, which I must ask you to help me in, even if you will not allow me the pleasure, the greatest pleasure I could take away with me, of knowing that I am assisting you in your career."

"Sebastion, you shall not go," cried Maxwell, more touched by his manner than he had ever been before; "you must think better of it, you must not leave us all just as we are getting to know and care for you."

"You will see," Sebastion answered decidedly, though he took leave with a more cordial and brotherly clasp of the hand than usual. When he had gone, Maxwell threw away his brush and palette, and began walking up and down the room with quick, agitated steps.

"There now," he said to himself, "it is done at last, and not so well done as I meant

to do it. What possessed me to make such a grandiloquent speech! Why did I say that about myself? I did not mean to say a word about myself; and is it true? I have gone on so long thinking that I loved her; and yet, I fancy, it must be only as one loves any other beautiful, perfect thing, that is as far off—yes, further off than heaven. And now, is he good enough for her, worthy to draw down such a star from its sphere? Oh! Alice! Alice! Alice!”

CHAPTER X.

"The wise man observes that there is a time to speak, and a time to keep silence. One meets with people in the world who seem never to have made the last of these observations."

BISHOP BUTLER.

CAROLINE'S first visit, made before the proper hour for fashionable visits had arrived, was paid at the white-stuccoed house, standing in a square, trim garden, where her mother's chief friends, and her own constant patronesses, the three Misses Ash, lived. They were kindly, good-humoured, brisk, middle-aged ladies, who had called on her mother as soon as they had heard that she was a clergyman's widow in reduced circumstances, and who had overwhelmed her with constant

little attentions, and really valuable services, ever since she had lived at Kingsmills. Gentle Mrs. Brandon felt herself profoundly grateful to them, and esteemed them with all her large powers of appreciation. But to confess the truth, her esteem was mixed, as esteem with her always was, with a little dash of fear.

When they began to ask her, as they did very soon after they had made her acquaintance, about her late husband's views, Mrs. Brandon was entirely bewildered and ashamed; she did not know whether he had been a Calvinist or an Armenian, if he had been High Church or Low, what he had thought about baptismal regeneration, if he had expected a personal reign, or even in a general way what his opinion had been about the battle of Armageddon, and the Man of Sin.

Seeing how necessary Miss Ash considered it to the character of a good clergyman, Mrs. Brandon tried hard to persuade herself that

doubtless Mr. Brandon had had views on all these subjects, and she lamented pathetically that the children should have lost a guidance so valuable, just at the time when they were beginning to want it, and that she was so very incompetent to fill their father's place. Miss Ash kindly offered such help as it lay in her power to give, and, with a deep sense of her own ignorance, Mrs. Brandon handed her children over to her friend to have their opinions formed on matters which, as she said, were not talked about so very much when she was young.

Miss Ash, having never been troubled with any of the difficulties which attend people of a less absolute character of mind, was vigilant and courageous. She took her young friends to hear her favourite preachers, she kept a strict watch on all the books they were allowed to read, she selected their teachers and companions, and, as far as she could, measured out views and shaped opinions for

them with the same dexterity and decision with which she measured flannel, and portioned out calico for the members of the provident fund. The women who enjoyed her bounty complained sometimes that they got too much of one thing and too little of another, and that they could have cut their stuff more according to their individual wants, if they had been allowed to have more say in the distribution themselves; Miss Ash naturally had not time to listen to such bewildering complaints, and if the young Brandons had bethought themselves of finding fault with her other measurements for similar reasons, they would not have met with greater attention. There were right views and wrong views, Miss Ash considered; she had never had the slightest difficulty in classing all thoughts and doctrines under one or other of the two heads, and she could not understand hesitation in other people. As the young Brandons grew up, Caroline turned out, upon

the whole, the most satisfactory pupil ; she was quick in catching up words and phrases, and she easily adopted ready-made opinions and views on most subjects, because as yet, opinions and views were all she wanted ; only on one or two quite personal matters had she as yet felt the necessity of having a belief.

Without meaning to be a hypocrite, Caroline deceived her mother's friends ; she used their words, and did not know, any more than they did ; that she had never had a glimpse into the meaning they put upon them ; that the deep reality that lay underneath all the talk in them was quite wanting in her.

Though there was a great resemblance between these three sisters, those who knew them well were at no loss to discover considerable differences amidst the likeness that distinguished them strongly enough from each other.

The eldest Miss Ash was a trifle taller, and

more imposing looking than her sisters. The description given of her by most of her friends was, that she was a valuable woman ; she was not, and had never, in all her life, aimed at being an ornamental one. She purchased her dresses, her shawls, and her caps, for the most part with a view to the use that was to be made of them when they had passed their allotted time in her service, and been transferred to other owners. Her mind's eye was fixed on the reversionary owner of her bonnet when she selected and trimmed it, and it was old or new fashioned, light or heavy, accordingly as it was intended to go to church the next winter on old widow Thompson's head, or be cleaned and arranged hereafter as a summer bonnet for little Selina Smith, the orphan child whom Miss Ash sent to school.

The effect of this method of selecting a wardrobe was not so beautiful as the motive. She had as little personal interest in her time, or her money, as in her wardrobe ; she spent

all her own, and as much of every other person's money as she could lay her hands on, in administering it to the wants of the poor. She went about doing good, and if she now and then did a little harm too, if her plummet was not long enough to sound the depths of wrongs she set herself to remedy, or her plasters large enough to cover the wounds she tried to heal, it was only because, the last trace of infirmity not yet conquered, her dictatorial temper, and love of measuring everything by her own standard, interfered with her real goodness.

The most dangerous mistake into which she fell was, that a certain want of sentiment, perhaps of imagination, perhaps of faith in her character, inclined her to set too great a value on material things. Professing loudly to hate Mammon, and renounce the things of the world, she had still an almost unlimited belief in its omnipotence, and while she believed that money, and nothing but money, could

accomplish all the good things that she was most anxious to see done, it was hardly possible that she should not have a considerable respect for it, and be ready to lay little schemes and plots for bringing the fortunate possessors of it to a right understanding of their responsibilities. She did not really think that the soul of a rich man was of more importance than the soul of a poor man ; but she thought the riches of the rich man a very important item to be secured for God's service, as well as his soul, and so the scale went down.

The second sister was a ditto to the elder, only with the peculiarities rather more exaggerated, as imitations always are. The third had one or two points of character entirely her own. Years ago, she had been called, by way of distinction, the pretty Miss Ash, and though it would have puzzled strangers to have identified her by that epithet now, she and her sisters retained a certain consciousness of the old difference. Her sisters still had pleasure

in putting aside the best dresses for her ; her bonnets were more elaborately trimmed than those of the other two ; she wore a few little ornaments when she went out in the evening, and when it was very hot or very rainy, she stayed at home while her sisters went out.

There was another tradition about her too, which her sisters whispered reverently when her back was turned.

Long ago, she had had a disappointment in love ; the legend gave her a sort of distinction with young girls, and with the old maids who formed her society.

The poor people who did not know either of these stories, distinguished her from her sisters without them. They opened the door for her at the very first knock when she came alone, without waiting to skurry away the wash-tub where so many unmended clothes were to be seen, or to snatch up the plate of broken bits of bread they were wastefully letting the children play with ; they were in a hurry to get

hold of her while she was unsupported by her sisters' vigilance, and pour into her ear stories that they would not have ventured to tell anyone else; then Miss Belinda Ash's little-worn purse came out, and in consequence, as her sisters remarked to her, the next time that a really urgent case of distress came up, it was empty. She was not nearly such a valuable woman as either of her sisters, but people liked to talk to her better, and she had an unfailing stock of sympathy and interest for all their stories, more especially if they happened to be love stories.

It had not made her bitter, that her own had been cut short at the very first chapter; it only seemed to have given her an insatiable taste for hearing other people's, and for helping them to bring theirs to a satisfactory conclusion. Almost all the interest and meaning of life were to her comprised in that one topic.

When the books of the Christian Ladies'

Reading Society came in, she got through the whole stock of memoirs and missionary records while her sisters were plodding through a volume a-piece. It must be confessed that her method of reading was summary. She looked through the table of contents, till she came to the chapter headed "His Marriage," or perhaps if it were a very copious memoir, "His first introduction to Miss ——;" then she turned quickly to the interesting part, and read it every word; if the details were given copiously, and with a little touch of sentiment, she said the book was well written and it pleased her; if they were scanty, she would just glance on to find out how many children the subject of the memoir had had, and what disease he died of, and then she had done with the book. The spiritual conflicts, the minute self-dissection, the religious experiences that made the work so edifying to her sisters, were very much lost upon her.

She could not forget the hold she had once

had on a fuller life than had fallen to her lot since; or think of the world that lay behind her, as seen through any other than the rose-coloured medium through which she had had her brief glimpse at it in earlier days.

If she had confined her interest to printed lives, this monomania would have been harmless enough, but, unfortunately for herself and other people, she had a faculty for getting into trouble by making undue exertions to bring about the desired catastrophe in real ones.

This very morning, while Caroline was preparing for her visit, she had been undergoing a lecture from her sister relative to one of the romances in real life she was endeavouring to conduct to a close, and had come out of it very self-convicted and humbled, and feeling bound on the very first opportunity to set herself to undo some work that she had been actively engaged in during several months.

Caroline Brandon and her favourite nephew,

William Ash, had lately occupied the situations of hero and heroine in a story more interesting than any of the memoirs she had ever come across. Unluckily Miss Belinda's way of reading the third volume of their history differed materially from the one which her elder sister had pre-arranged in her equally active mind, and, after a good deal of controversy, she had been obliged that morning to resign the poetical reading for the practical one.

"What does it signify," Miss Ash had asked, indignantly, "your encouraging a foolish boy and girl to talk nonsense to each other, when you know as well as I do that they have not a farthing to marry upon? I wonder at you, sister Belinda, *with your experience*; I should have expected greater discretion from you."

The arrow, not a very sharp one, went straight to Miss Belinda's heart. She began to wonder at herself, it had never occurred

to her before that she was running the risk of leading another person into the same dreary road of fruitless waiting and hoping, from which she had only escaped after the sojourning of so many years.

She felt too much troubled after that talk to join her sisters when they set off in the spring sunshine to attend to some of their numerous occupations. She stayed at home alone, fuller that May morning of old recollections than she had been for many a year; and when Caroline Brandon broke in upon her reflections, looking very fresh, and bright, and pretty, in spite of the faded bonnet, her whole heart went out in gentle compassion towards her. She decided in her own mind that her coming at that particular time was what she called a Providence, and that it was incumbent upon her in some special manner to improve the occasion.

Caroline was by no means sorry when she found that Miss Belinda was alone. Her style

of conversation interested her more than that of her sisters did. She and Miss Belinda had had several confidential conversations before in that sunny little parlour, and they had not always been, it must be confessed, on such topics as Miss Ash would have thought tended to edification. When the kind lady, after going through her usual round of anxious inquiries concerning the health of each member of the Brandon family, put on a mysterious look and announced that she had something particular to say to her, Caroline's heart began to beat rather fast, and her colour to rise. She had noticed the instant she entered a certain letter on the work-table, directed in a hand she had seen before, and with the Oxford post-mark plain in the corner, and she thought she knew quite well what was coming. It was no very deep sentiment that called out those alarming signs; a good deal of fluttering vanity lay uppermost, and underneath that, a degree of more genuine regard than had entered into

any other of her numerous likings. Miss Belinda involuntarily began by turning the letter about in her hands ; she had got into a habit of reading all " poor William's " letters to Caroline, and there actually was a message for her in this one. She wished, for half a minute, that she had had the presence of mind to repress that sentence of the letter, when she had read it aloud at breakfast, and then there would have been no explanation on the subject ; her sisters would not have said anything, her conscience would have allowed her to go on in the old way, and what a pleasant morning they might have had. She dismissed the thought however as unfaithful, and pushed the letter fairly out of reach to the other end of the table.

" My dear," she said, " it is not anything about William I am going to tell you, though we have had a beautiful letter from him this morning, crossed on both sides ; I was only going to say something about myself."

Caroline could not help her countenance changing a little, and Miss Belinda showed that she noticed the change, by heaving a sympathising sigh.

“Yes, my dear,” she went on, “I have been thinking that it might be right to tell you, for a warning, about something that happened to me a long time ago; perhaps someone may have told you that I was—that I was—”

“Yes,” said Caroline, “Miss Sarah told me a long time ago, that you were—”

Neither the old nor the young lady could think of any quite satisfactory phrase by which to express her meaning, and they were silent, while to the cheek of the elder a faint colour came fluttering up, such as had not brightened it for many a day.

“Well, my dear,” she went on, after a pause, “I’ll tell you what happened to me when I was about your age; it is not a particularly interesting story—not at all like what one

reads about in books—but it may do for a warning. When I was about as old as you are now, I went to stay with an uncle who lived a great way from Kingsmills; it was the first visit I had ever paid in my life, my dear, and I remember I wondered very much whether anything would have happened to me before I came back again; I did not think then how long it would be before I came back, or that the best part of my life would have passed first.

“Well! my uncle took a great fancy to me, he would not let me go home when the time fixed for the end of my visit came; he wrote to my father and mother to ask them to let me stay longer. He was very rich, indeed, and had no children of his own, so they were willing enough to give leave, and this happened over and over again till I had given up all hope of getting away, and had come to consider my uncle’s house my home. I say hope, because though my uncle was very

rich, and very kind to me, his house was not nearly so pleasant as this one was then, with my father and mother, and my young brothers and sisters living in it. Everything was very stately and handsome ; people paid me a great deal of attention when they saw what a favourite I was ; but it was rather a dull kind of life for a young girl. I had to read a great many dull books out loud that I did not understand, and to play at back-gammon all through the evening.

“ When we had company, it was generally old people. My uncle used to say out loud before every one that it was best that it should be so, because he did not want any young man to fall in love with me, and carry me away from him ; and he used often to add something about its being worth my while to stay with him till he died. Sometimes, however — though very seldom — he would allow me to go out to pay visits alone. There were several houses where I was always

welcome, but I very soon learned to keep all the opportunities for going out I had to visit one. It was a large house, a little way out of the town; my dear, I can see all the rooms and the garden-walks as plainly as if I had just walked through them. It used to be such a holiday to me when I could go to spend the whole day there. It was a large family who lived in that house, and they all seemed to have taken a great fancy to me, the father and the mother, and the sisters, there were five of them, all a little older than I was.

“They had a younger brother; yes, my dear, I see you have guessed it, that was he. I don’t know how it began, but every one seemed to take it for granted that we liked each other; the sisters began very soon to repeat little things—foolish little things—such as I may have repeated to you, my dear. And I thought a good deal about them, while I was reading those dull books I told you about,

and playing the games of back-gammon at night. When I had known him longer he began to talk more to me himself. I don't think he ever *said*, or that any one ever exactly *said*, that we were not engaged, only because there would have been no use at all in asking my uncle's consent to such a thing, and that we were waiting, trusting to each other, till something happened; we did not say so—it would not have sounded well to have said so—but, somehow or other, everyone seemed to take it for granted that it was so between us.

“A good many years passed away in this manner; I was no longer so very young, and I daresay I did not look quite as well as I had done when I came from home; but that did not seem to make any difference to anyone. At last my uncle died. My father and mother came to me then. Everyone thought that I was to be quite an heiress. I remember I was surprised at the number of letters of

condolence that were sent to me. But, my dear, it was all a mistake ; when my uncle's will came to be opened, it was found that almost all the money was left to his wife's relations. The will had been made many years before I came to live with him ; and, though he had always meant to alter it, he had put it off from time to time, till it was too late.

“My father was very angry, and said I had been very badly used, and my poor mother cried a great deal. I remember I felt rather hurt about their making such a very great trial of the disappointment, for I knew so little of the world then, that I did not at all understand of how much consequence money is. I thought that the thing I cared for most was safe, and I could afford to let anything else go. I comforted myself with thinking that I had some friends who would not think any less of me because I was not to have all my uncle's money. I felt quite impatient till I could show my

father and mother how they would behave about it.

“It was, however, several days before they called; they came, all the five sisters, in deep mourning, for they were distant relations of my uncle's, and had had a legacy left them.

“My dear, if I live to be a hundred years old, I shall never forget what I felt when I went into the parlour to them and saw their faces. I did not at all know what was going to happen then, but my heart seemed to die—the change there was in them could not have been put into any words, but I saw it all before one of them had spoken. Still I tried to believe that it might be my fancy, and I turned from one to another and talked and asked questions all in the old way. I did so hope that some little smile, or look, or word would come at last to break the kind of restraint that seemed to have come over us, and make me feel that all was right again.

“They got up to go very soon, without anything of the sort having come. Just as they were leaving the house one of them chanced to tell me that William, (his name was William, is not that a curious coincidence, my dear?) that William had gone abroad on account of his health, for a time; and that news kept up my spirits for a few days longer. I flattered myself that he might feel differently from what his sisters did, and that, perhaps, he would write to me.

“Two days after that visit we all came back again to Kingsmills—and, you will be surprised to hear it, but that is all the story. In my unenlightened days, when I used to read novels, I used to remark that there was *an end* to every story, but mine has had no end—for a long time I used to think it must have, as all the others had, and I used to expect so surely that something more would happen.

“For a long time, I hardly ever came in from a walk, or a visit, without thinking that, perhaps, there would be a letter for me in the house, or that perhaps, even, he would be there himself; but time passed on, it grew too late for anything to happen, and I had to wake up and find that I had wasted nearly all my life. It makes one’s life very useless and very sad to spend it in always thinking that something will happen when nothing ever comes. Don’t you do it; you had better take any lot that comes to you, any active, useful lot, than waste all your life in waiting, and be disappointed after all.”

Caroline looked up to the speaker’s face, quite colourless again now, and thought how wan and sallow and faded it looked, if compared only with the cheery, brisk, self-satisfied faces of the other two maiden sisters.

“I am sure,” she said, and this time speaking with considerable knowledge of her own

heart, "that I should never spend all my life in thinking of one person. I should have taken the first opportunity of marrying some one else, and showing that I did not care."

"But supposing that you did care, or, my dear, supposing that the other opportunity had never come," said Miss Belinda. "You are quite young yet, I only tell you this little story for a warning."

Caroline sat silent for a minute or two, wondering what could have been said to make the warning necessary. Miss Belinda had never talked to her in anything like this strain before, and her vanity, perhaps also her heart, which had, in truth, been just a little touched, were wounded by it.

While Miss Belinda rested back in her chair to recover from the exertion of such a long discourse, Caroline's thoughts were busy drawing out her own moral from the tale. The good lady had not had a very distinct

idea of the lesson ~~she meant~~ her warning to teach, and she would have been somewhat surprised and shocked if any one could have written out Caroline's conclusions from it in black and white, and shown them to her.

"She told it me for a warning," Caroline said to herself; "she means that I am not to trust to anyone's professions of love, not even to her dear William's, whom she thinks so perfect, and that if I wish to be happy I had better not allow myself to care too much about anyone. Well, I won't; I was beginning to think the same myself. Love is a very uncertain thing, it comes and goes, one never knows about it; but there are things that one may be quite sure of, money for instance. If I were to marry a very rich man now, how nice it would be, how it would take them all by surprise; no one would have occasion to tell me warning stories then. If *he* has been telling his aunt to

speak to me, he would be convinced that I am not a person to be taken up and let down at anyone's pleasure. I should be of consequence if I were rich. Heigho!"

"My dear," said Miss Belinda, rousing herself with a feeling of self-reproach as she heard Caroline's sigh, "let us talk of other things."

They tried, but it was rather a poor attempt at conversation; they were neither of them much practiced in self-control. Miss Belinda could not get up anything like her usual interest in the every-day gossip of the Brandon family, or in the success of Caroline's collection for the Sunday schools. She would have reverted to the old topic of talk about William again, and probably in spite of her sister's remonstrance, Caroline would have heard every word of the letter, if the entrance of another visitor had not broken up the conference just in time to save her consistency.

Caroline remembered suddenly that she had another visit to pay that morning, and took a hasty and not very cordial leave of her friend. She felt as she left the room that she should never go there with quite the same feeling, or quite the same pleasure again.

Miss Belinda sighed as the door closed after Caroline—she took up the letter remorsefully, and laid it aside in the case where she kept all the letters her nephew had ever written to her. Perhaps, she thought, to comfort herself, now that I have told her all this and put her quite on her guard, I may read the letter and give her the message some day. The some day was a long time in coming, and a great many unlooked-for things had happened in the mean time. The poor little letter lay long in its case, and got to look very faded and yellow before it was allowed to see the light again.

If Caroline had stayed a little longer, if

the visitor had not come in, or if Miss Ash had not expressed herself so energetically at breakfast, it and some of the people it concerned might have had quite a different fate.

CHAPTER XI.

**"For we walk blind-fold—a minute may be ruin,
A step may reach the precipice."**

TUPPER.

CAROLINE's mortifications and vanity-wounds were not to come to an end when she left the Miss Ashes' house; there seemed to be a conspiracy against her that morning. She had to wait a long time alone in Mrs. Warren's handsome morning-room, and when at last the lady of the house entered, she came, (dressed in oh! such a beautiful spring bonnet and exquisite fresh shawl), but wearing an air of haste and pre-occupation, and not showing by any means the same pleasure at the sight of Caroline that she had been accus-

toned to show some months ago. Caroline had fancied that she had detected a growing coolness in her friend's manner ever since the evening of the party at her house, at which she had been present; but to-day it was too marked for her to be able any longer to entertain a doubt about it.

Mrs. Warren asked a few questions about Mrs. Brandon's health in a constrained tone, but during the answers her eyes were wandering restlessly over the room, sometimes engaged, Caroline felt sure, in counting the weather-stains in her unfortunate bonnet-ribbons, sometimes glancing anxiously towards the door. The sound of a carriage driving up to the entrance was a welcome interruption to both. Mrs. Warren rose quickly.

"You are going out for a drive?" Caroline said; "pray don't let me keep you." She glanced out of the window as she spoke, and, oh! how gay and pleasant the handsome open carriage looked, the coats of the two well-

kept horses glancing in the sunshine. What a difference there was between riding there beautifully dressed, and plodding along the dusty road in a heavy bonnet and cape. What a difference between rich and poor, thought Caroline.

“Well, my dear,” said Mrs. Warren, looking quite cordial and relieved, “if you really don’t mind my running away so soon, I will confess to you that I am particularly engaged this morning. My brother, Mr. Gadstone, is going to drive me to his house at Newlands to give some final orders about the arrangements of the furniture there; I am quite sorry to leave you, but you know a man whose time is so valuable as my brother’s is, should never be kept waiting a moment. Pray stay and rest as long as ever you like, for I know what a long, dusty walk you have before you; I wonder how people walk at all this weather, I am sure it makes me feel quite languid. If there is anything that you would like before you go,

my dear, I am sure the servants— Oh! Richard, is that you?" Mrs. Warren exclaimed, interrupting herself with a kind of start as the door opened. "I was just this minute coming down to you, my dear."

Mrs. Warren's face, as the opening door admitted her brother, would have formed a study of expression for an artist; though she laid claim to be a very fine lady, she had by no means a fine lady's control over her countenance; nothing could be plainer than the annoyance, surprise, almost fear, that her features showed at his entrance. The brother's face was quite stolid and immoveable, but his eyes and mouth said something, too.

"So you thought to manœuvre against me, did you? You had better have left that alone," his eyes conveyed at a single glance—a glance before which a timid woman might have trembled. A bystander would have come to the conclusion that in this house, too,

Caroline had been made the subject of conversation before her visit.

She herself, however, missed this little by-play. The gentleman, without taking any notice of his sister's remark, walked up to her and addressed her with a sort of ostentatious, obstinate politeness, and she only felt that, after having experienced all the pain of a slight, she was now being treated with quite particular consideration. She could not help feeling a sort of gratitude to the person who had caused the agreeable change in her position.

"I came up stairs, Miss Brandon," Mr. Gadstone proceeded, in his slow, pompous voice, after the first greetings were over, "because I was afraid that my sister might possibly forget to deliver a message that I entrusted her with, as soon as I understood that you were in the house. I am going to drive my sister over this morning to Newlands, to see how the work-people are getting on

with the finishing of my new house there, and all I can say is that I shall be *proud* if you will give us the pleasure of your company and the advantage of your—h'm—I am sure, excellent taste."

The speech had evidently been composed on the stairs, and took a little time to deliver.

"My dear Richard," Mrs. Warren broke in, rather falteringly; "I shall be, I am sure, only too glad to have Caroline's company; but I was explaining to you, if you remember, down-stairs, why I did not propose it myself. Mrs. Brandon is so very ill, that I really think it is asking too much, trespassing far too long on our dear young friend's time."

"She's the best judge of that," Mr. Gadstone answered, sharply, turning round and facing his sister as he spoke.

Caroline ought to have detected the difference in the tones; the smooth pompousness of the voice that addressed her, the coarse, rude,

natural sound of the sentence that was jerked out afterwards. She was, unfortunately, too full of herself to be very particular in her observations; but she had a kind of instinct that a great deal depended on the answer she gave just then.

"I don't think," she said, blushing and looking very handsome; "that mamma would be anxious, if I stayed out a little longer to-day than usual, for she knew that I was coming here, and it is so very kind of—of—Mrs. Warren to be so anxious to have me."

"And yet, anxious as I am, I would not have your poor mamma made uneasy for the world, my dear," insinuated the lady, gently.

"Maria, you go first; I am bringing Miss Brandon down with me," her brother said, in a tone that cut the conversation short at once, and saved Caroline the trouble of answering.

Mrs. Warren sailed down the stairs in silence, and put herself into the carriage with-

out waiting for the other two, feeling tolerably certain that, unless some unlooked-for piece of good luck intervened, her days of getting into that carriage *first* were numbered. Caroline, for the first time in her life, leaned back in state in a comfortable carriage, with her face to the horses. In the drives, few and far between, that she had taken in her uncle's carriage, she had always been required to sit backwards. The quick motion of the carriage through the bright air raised her spirits, and the sight of Mrs. Warren sitting silent beside her with her veil down, instead of depressing her, as would seem natural, added something very like a thrill of triumph to her exhilaration. She began to chatter; the houses they passed, the spring-like appearance of the fields and hedges, every trifle afforded her subject for observation. Mr. Gadstone, who sat opposite to her, did not say much in return; but he punctually greeted every remark with his slow, elaborate smile. People really clever

about business and things of that sort never talk much, and he really seems very easily amused, far more easily amused than cousin Sebastian, thought Caroline.

When they reached the house, Mr. Gadstone jumped from the carriage to hand the ladies out, *almost* like a young man, Caroline said to herself, though to be sure, not as poor William Ash would have done it. Caroline found herself obliged to enter the house before Mrs. Warren, and the look she got in consequence somewhat disconcerted her. They passed through the entrance-hall, and began a slow progress through the newly-furnished rooms. There was much to be seen in them calculated to amuse Caroline and dazzle her eyes, unaccustomed to so much magnificence; but before long she began to feel ill at ease. In one of the rooms into which they entered, Mr. Gadstone observed that something had been done contrary to his orders; he became very much excited about it, and stayed behind in order

that he might scold the delinquents more at his leisure. Neither did he appear after that to be in any haste to rejoin the ladies ; he went here and there giving orders, became entirely absorbed in business, and seemed to forget Caroline's presence altogether. Mrs. Warren, languid and cold, hardly spoke to her, she did not give her any invitation to follow when she went up to inspect the upper story of the house, and poor Caroline had the mortification to find herself left alone, and apparently overlooked by both her companions.

The minutes passed on to quarters of an hour, the quarters to hours ; she began to get very frightened and anxious. What should she say when she got home, what excuse could she possibly make for having been so long absent. She began heartily to wish that she had not come. She had offended Mrs. Warren ; and all, as it seemed, for the sake of a drive that would end in her getting into terrible disgrace with her aunt at home.

The difficulty of thinking of any excuse to offer at home for her inconsiderate conduct presented itself to her under a more and more formidable aspect every minute. She began to think that she should be glad of any event that would solve it for her. She thought less and less every minute of Mr. Gadstone and his beautiful house, and became quite absorbed in the wish that something would happen, the overturning of the carriage, or anything that would furnish her with an excuse to make when she got in, and cause her absence during the entire day to be passed over without comment. She was standing in the large bay-window, with her back to the handsome drawing-room, and her face towards the newly-laid-out garden, when these thoughts began to press with almost uncontrollable weight on her mind. She had taken the desperate resolution of going in search of Mrs. Warren, and entreating to be taken home immediately, when, on half-turning round, she

discovered that her host had entered the room unperceived during her reverie, and that he was looking at her with—even Caroline noticed it—a very disagreeable expression on his face, patronising, and yet supercilious.

“So,” he said, advancing as he met Caroline’s eye, “you are a little bit out of humour, Miss Brandon; you thought I had forgotten you, did you. Oh! ah! you were never more mistaken in your life, let me tell you.”

“I am anxious about getting home,” faltered Caroline, really frightened at the strange familiarity of this address.

Mr. Gadstone coolly walked up to the window, took a seat close to her, and looked her full in the face.

“I have ordered the carriage,” he said, “and you shall be driven home as fast as my horses can go; but you and I will have our talk first. Miss Brandon, I am a man of business, I attend to one thing at a time, that’s the reason why I left you just now. I saw a

matter of business that ought to be attended to at once, and I knew I could explain it all to you afterwards ; you are far too sensible a girl to be offended by that, now are you not ?”

Caroline, in her confusion, made an inarticulate reply, but it was taken in good part.

“ Thank you, that’s all right,” Mr. Gadstone went on, “ but now, Miss Brandon, I have something to tell you about myself that concerns you too. All my life I’ve made up my mind that whatever I had it should be of the very best, and, as a rule, I have found it to answer. Good things wear well and serve well, and one is never sorry in the end if one has given a good price for them. I have had a good deal of trouble about it, but I flatter myself that, at last, I have succeeded in getting the best house, and the best garden, and the best carriage and horses in Kingsmills, or, indeed, in the county round ; and I think it will be a strange thing if, with all this, I can’t get the best and handsomest wife to

match them. The very first time I saw you, I said to myself, that's the girl I should like to see the mistress of my house, and sitting at the head of my table. Some people would tell you it was love at first sight, but I am not clever at making speeches; however, call it what you will, the fact is the same. I made up my mind at once, and all that there is to be done, is for you to make up your mind, and, in short, say whether or not you will have me."

There was not a shade of doubt in his face, not a tremble of agitation in his voice. It was different, very different, certainly, from any fancy Caroline had ever had about the words that were to decide so much. Every feeling within her of delicacy, of taste, of love of goodness and nobleness, rose up in rebellion, and cried out against him in her heart. She raised her eyes, and looked at her suitor, as he stood before her. There was nothing in his appearance, certainly, that could inspire a feeling of preference, conciliate a single taste.

She was silent for a minute. For one minute longer she had her fate in her own hands. How often afterwards, in that very room, looking from that very window, she recalled the flight of those precious seconds. Her heart beat very quick, an indignant *no* rose to her lips, but—but, the shadows in the room were lengthening, she remembered how very angry her aunt would be with her when she got back. With just one word, she might free herself from that yoke for ever, she might secure herself from ever being scolded again. What a triumphant answer it would be to make when she returned.

“Aunt, you have nothing to do with me for the future. I am engaged to Mr. Gadstone.”

Besides, was it not what she had been wishing for that very morning, to be mistress of that beautiful house? Would it not be a grand way of teaching the Ashes not to give her unnecessary advice?

Mrs. Warren's approaching step was heard.

"She will be obliged to treat me with respect when I am her sister-in-law, twice as rich, and of more consequence than she is," thought Caroline. She put out her hand—the deed was done.

"I—I should like very much to be—to be—" the mistress of your house, Caroline would have said, if her faltering voice would have enabled her to finish her sentence.

"My wife," Mr. Gadstone interposed, taking her beautiful white hand between his two large red ones, and making an awkward attempt to raise it to his lips. His harsh, pompous voice, bringing out that solemn word, made Caroline start, and an undefined feeling of foreboding, of disgust, of longing to recall what she had done, shot for a moment through her heart. She snatched away her hand before it had touched his lips, and turned away to the window. Her lover sent one surprised scowling glance after

her, but his brow soon smoothed again. No one could look handsomer than Caroline did in her little fit of indignation, and perhaps he thought that sort of thing was the right thing; she was more of a lady than his sister, anyone could see that; and he had no objection to her now and then giving herself airs—at all events, till they were married.

Mrs. Warren entered at that moment; she had observed their position together near the window, and Caroline's gesture as she snatched away her hand; but she was too politic to make any remark on what she had seen. The fatal words might not have been spoken yet, and she would leave herself the chance of making one more remonstrance.

"My dear Richard," she said, as she advanced, "the carriage is standing at the door, we shall be quite late for dinner; are not you wasting a great deal of time?"

Mr. Gadstone came forward to meet her, rubbing his hands.

“ Well, I am quite ready to go now,” he said, “ and if I do keep dinner waiting for once in my life, I don’t mind. We have not been wasting time, have we? Eh, Miss Brandon?”

His loud laugh rang through the room, and seemed to make all the handsome cut-glass pendants that were hanging from the ceiling jingle. Caroline, meeting his eye, felt constrained to answer it with a little imitation-smile, the first of a sham coinage that had to be renewed at a great cost often afterwards.

Mr. Gadstone offered her his arm to take her down stairs; it was a strange sensation to Caroline, the being escorted ceremoniously down those stately stairs, while a group of obsequious servants and workpeople exchanged knowing winks, and Mrs. Warren followed with down-cast mien behind. She could not help glancing up and down as they paused for a second on the landing-place. How grand everything was; their house in

Stone Street would have stood on that landing-place, and Earle's Court itself in the hall. All this was actually going to belong to her. The cold misgivings, the outraged tastes, the little half-awakened, rebellious sentiments that had threatened to torment her, shrank away at the thought, and hid themselves in some deep recess of her heart, where they could lie quiet for a time, and vanity sat firm on its shaken throne again.

At the hall-door Mrs. Warren made one last struggle to retain the supremacy that had been hers so long.

"Home, first," she said to the servants, in an insinuating voice, as her brother was occupied in placing Caroline in the carriage.

"To Stone Street, as fast as you can," roared out the master's voice; "and you, Maria, get in directly; don't you understand that Miss Brandon is anxious to be home soon?"

He seated himself at Caroline's side as he spoke. Mrs. Warren got in alone, and took her

place with her back to the horses. The footman telegraphed the news to the coachman over her head. She had been troublesome and exacting in the use she had made of her brother's carriages, horses, and servants, and the men were not at all sorry to witness her discomfiture, and to be assured that she had been forced to abdicate her throne and make room for a younger and fairer mistress to reign in her stead. The coachman showed the zeal with which he entered into his master's wishes by driving towards the town at a rapid, triumphant pace, that might have turned a more sober head than Caroline's giddy. As she passed through the streets, she could not help thinking how changed everything was with her since she had walked through them with such mortified feelings in the morning. She was of consequence now, she thought. She watched how the weary foot-passengers scurried away at the crossings before the dashing carriage, and how, arrived on the safe pavement, they

turned round and stared. She felt keenly the difference there was between riding and walking through the world.

When they stopped before the house at Stone Street, she saw at a glance that all the children had collected at the window to watch the carriage, the neighbours were looking out too—it made quite a commotion, rattling down their quiet street. The footman's rap, as consequential as his master's voice, almost drove their humble door in. It was opened by Ruth herself, with a face of grave remonstrance. Miss Earle stood in the middle of the entrance-hall, awful in her silent indignation. Sebastian was a little behind her, with a look of reproof on his face too. The children were clamouring in various keys:—

“Where have you been? Where can you have been? Mamma has been so uneasy about you; we waited dinner for you half an hour; we were just going to tea.”

“How lucky!” thought Caroline, “that

I have something to say. I am really very glad that I accepted Mr. Gadstone; it certainly was much the wisest thing to do. I hardly dare have come home if there had not been *that* to say." Thinking thus, she walked straight up to Miss Earle, with an assumption of dignity that nothing but the knowledge of her new position would have given her courage to venture on.

"I have something particular to say to mamma. I wish to explain it all to mamma," she said, quite firmly.

"I am glad to hear that you can explain it," Miss Earle said, very gravely; "it would certainly have been unpardonable in you to have treated me with such disrespect and made your mother so anxious as you have done without a very sufficient reason."

"I will explain myself to mamma," answered, not Caroline Brandon, but the future richest lady in Kingsmills, with an air that Mrs. Warren herself might have envied.

The amazed little group of questioners retired into the parlour, and Caroline ran upstairs, quivering with the agitation of her first domestic encounter and victory. Poor Mrs. Brandon received her with open arms; she had retired to her bedroom early, really half-frightened out of her gentle wits by her daughter's prolonged absence. The tender rejoicings she made over her return, and Caroline's own remorse for having caused so much uneasiness, threw them both into such a state of agitation that, when the explanation came, it was given with all the incoherence, embarrassment, and tender mother and daughter embraces, that would have befitted a genuine love-story.

Mrs. Brandon heard the history of her daughter's engagement with much surprise, but without misgivings; she had never seen Mr. Gadstone, but she had been accustomed to think of him with a certain awe, as the influential person on whose will her son's

future fate depended, who held in his hands the power of making him and his brothers anything that he chose. The news her daughter brought her threw her into a tremor of happy mother's pride and triumph. She saw no end to the prosperity that opened out before the family now, and she could not refrain from bestowing the fondest praise on the fortunate girl who had secured such a home—such prospects for all the boys. Ruth, in the midst of her amazement, was far too glad to see once more a gleam of joy in her mother's faded eyes to say a word or look a look that might have checked it.

The rest of the evening was spent in a dreamy, unreal kind of tumult. Caroline wandered restlessly from room to room; the children made mysteries to each other of the news in corners; Miss Earle alone, unmoved, sat silent as usual over her knitting. Whenever her cold eye fell on Caroline, the girl felt a little thrill of triumph move her heart.

“Yes, you may look as unsympathising as you please,” she thought. “I have passed out of your dominion. I am going to be married; you have never been married.” How many marriages are made from no better reason than impatience of the yoke at home! How many foolish ones, weary of Solomon’s scourge of rods, make haste to thrust themselves under Rehoboam’s scourge of scorpions.

At night, when it was no longer possible to keep constantly moving about, Caroline’s spirits flagged a little. In spite of the fatigue and excitement she had undergone during the day, she did not get to sleep till long after her usual time; Ruth found her lying in bed with her eyes wide open when she returned softly from her last visit to her mother’s room, and the question with which she greeted her, the first and only direct question she addressed to her on the subject of her engagement, was expressed in a somewhat querulous and uncertain tone of voice.

“At all events, Ruth,” she said, raising herself upon her elbow in bed and looking at her sister, who was preparing to put the candle out, “you must allow that it is some satisfaction to be engaged to be married before Alice.”

Ruth let the extinguisher fall on the light, and no answer came to Caroline out of the darkness.

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